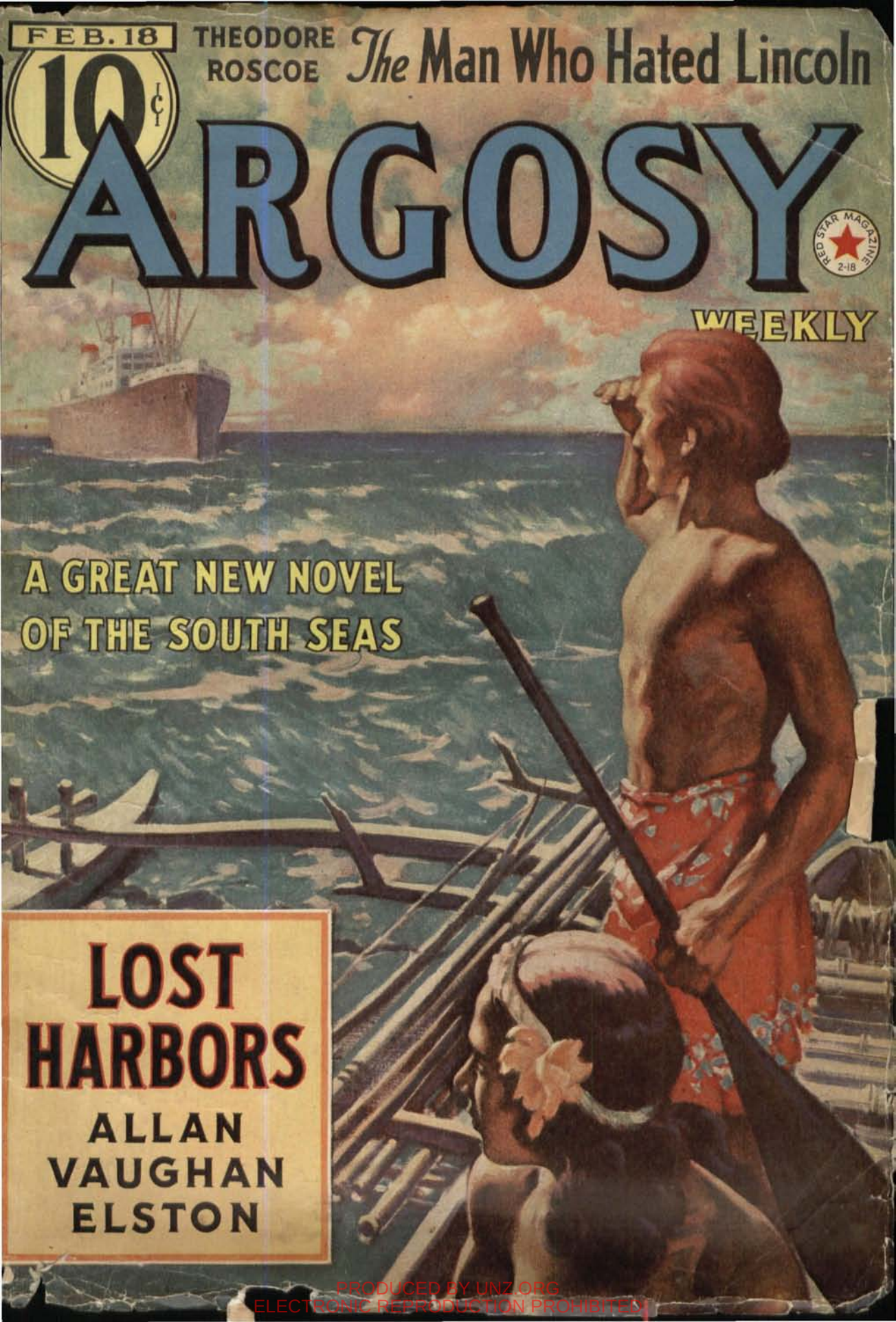

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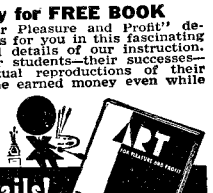

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Illustrating Lost Harbors

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CHAPTER I

DERELICT

THE sea was like oiled glass. Reed Darrow, the tramp's mate, hooked a leg over the rail and sat shading his eyes against the glare. "It looks," he observed to Skipper Somby, "like she's trapped in the doldrums."

Far off on the sun-singed rim of the glaze stood a schooner, still and jaded out there. The tramp's crew, who had been watching her for an hour, had noted no headway. It was dead water for sails—a stagnation over which for days on end no breath had stirred.

Somby lowered his telescope to agree gravely. "She's got distress rags aloft, Mr. Darrow, and I can't make out any hands on deck."

"Means a tidy bit of salvage," Darrow suggested with a gleam, "if we give her a tow."

Somby turned to him stiffly. "Means a

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Before them Vaila wove the graceful pattern of the sacred dance

chance to help honest seamen in trouble. Shift the course and we'll stop alongside."

As the mate swaggered toward the bridge, Skipper Somby looked after him without warmth. Always on the make, Darrow was. As cold as any shark, calculating salvage profit even before they had a line out to the derelict! Somby himself belonged to an older, mellower school.

The telegraph jangled and the tramp veered sluggishly to starboard. Somby again raised his telescope to gaze out toward the stranded schooner. No sign of life on her. There she lay, helplessly becalmed. For how long? wondered Somby. Sympathy softened the tough, weathered lines of his face. He remembered his own days before the mast, and times of deathly calm like this. Impatiently he called aft: "Stand by to lend a hand, men; and look sharp."

Ritchie, the half-pint Australian bos'n, was on the bridge with Darrow. "She dawn't look like she's worth 'aulin' in, mite," chirped Ritchie. "It's one-third we get fer 'aulin' in a derelict, ain't it, mite?"

"One-third of ship and cargo."

Ritchie snickered. "Well, in that cise let's 'ope she's got a cargo."

"You never know your luck."

Somby, from the foredeck, frowned up at them. That was another thing he didn't approve of about Darrow. The mate was a bit too chummy with the men. It didn't make for discipline. Too bad, Somby reflected, that he'd run afoul of that strike in Sydney. Eight men out of thirteen had walked off the ship there. And more than once since Somby had regretted having sent Darrow ashore for replacements.

With a shrug the skipper turned back to the rail. The tramp was now bearing in toward the derelict. At half a dozen lengths, Somby could still see no life aboard. "Ahoy, schooner!" he bawled. And no response came to his hail.

She was a small vessel, top-heavy and ill-proportioned. Too much beam for her keel, thought Somby. And no cargo to speak of, because she was riding too high. *Fairhaven* was the name painted on her. Hand-hewn timbers caught Somby's eye. A stout old tub for all that, thought Somby.

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Again a hail and again no answer.

As the tramp hove to three lengths away, Mate Darrow sauntered forward to join Somby. "Her rigging looks fit, skipper. All she needs is a breeze."

"And a crew, Mr. Darrow."

Darrow cocked a shrewd eye toward the derelict. "Don't think she's been abandoned, skipper. Her lifeboat's still in the davits."

"Aye, so it is. We'll board her at once."

A boat was lowered. Somby embarked in it with Bos'n Ritchie and two men at the oars. They crossed a narrow stretch of dead water to the schooner.

ARRIVING alongside, Somby and Ritchie climbed aboard. Once more their hails brought no answer. "She's a blarsted ghost ship!" shivered Ritchie.

"Take a look below, bos'n. I'll go forward."

From the aft deck Somby went first into the midship deckhouse. It was deserted. Scraps of canvas lay on the floor there—a ball of twine, scissors and a sail needle. Somby, shipwise, nodded grimly as he read this sign. A shroud or shrouds had been made for burial over the rail.

The master's cabin was likewise deserted. On a stand there stood a basin of water. Somby sniffed at it, turning aside with a grimace. It was foul water, yellowish and alive with wiggletails. Was that the answer? Had this crew been caught in the doldrums with foul water? Yet they couldn't all be gone, thought Somby. At least one survivor, dead or alive, must be still aboard.

Somby passed up the blistered foredeck to the fo'castle. No surviving seaman lay in a hammock there. Yet a complete kit of duffel was in evidence by each hammock. If the crew had taken to boats, they would have taken along kits.

Somby turned dismally back to the foredeck. Then, looking up and aft, he saw what might be the last survivor. On the schooner's tiny bridge, and collapsed over the binnacle, lay a slight still figure. From this angle it seemed to be a boy.

He hurried to the bridge companion, climbed up to find a boy of not more than ten years between helm and binnacle—and still living. The lad's eyes were closed; his lips were swollen and burning suns had parched his face to the semblance of a peeling onion.

Somby stepped to the bridge rail, shouting down to his two sailors in the boat. "Fetch water and brandy, men. Lively!"

He returned to the boy, picked him up and carried him into the chartroom. The movement made the boy open his eyes. He stared dully for a brief moment, then closed them again. "Steady, lad!" urged Somby. He chafed the small blistered hands. "It's been a long rough watch for you, matey, but it's all done now."

The boy tried to answer but the thickness of his tongue choked him. Then Ritchie popped in and stood gaping at the figure in Somby's arms.

"Blime!" gasped Ritchie. "Is 'e the only one left?"

"Aye, unless you found someone below."

"There ain't nothin' below, skipper, 'cept a 'arf cargo o' shell."

Somby looked up sharply. "Don't stand there gawking, bos'n. Hurry along that water and brandy. And signal Mr. Darrow to get a towline over here."

"This 'ere salvage ain't 'ardly worth 'auling, skipper."

"Blast the salvage," snapped Somby. "Mind your tongue and obey orders."

Ritchie sidled out. He returned shortly with the two boatmen who had brought flasks from the tramp freighter. "The mite, 'e's sendin' over a towline," announced Ritchie.

The boy was given water first, sparingly. Then a few drops of brandy. His eyes opened to see the stocky, gruff Somby bending over him. The boy's lips drooped and he tried to smile. "Did we ketch a breeze?" he asked faintly.

"You won't need any breeze, lad," the tramp's skipper assured him. "From here on you're shipping with steam."

Another swallow of brandy and the boy tried to stand up.

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"Steady there, matey," Somby protested. He picked the little fellow up and carried him like a child down the companionway. Then on to the fo'castle, where he made the boy point out his hammock.

"Fetch the kit from it," Somby directed one of his sailors.

The boy and his kit were lowered into the boat. "Take him to my own cabin and put him to bed there," Somby said to the boatmen. "Tell Mr. Darrow to give him a glass of lime juice, nothing more. Then let him go to sleep."

The boat pulled off toward the freighter with the boy.

SOMBY, with Ritchie at his heels, returned to the schooner's chartroom. The ship's log was there, and the skipper began thumbing through the more recent entries. With a shock he discovered that the last entry was some ten days old.

No headway. Three more of the crew down with fever. Cook thinks it's the swamp water we took on back at Alufa. Are boiling the water now, but

The entry stopped in midline. It was clear to Somby that here the schooner's master must have been stricken himself.

He closed the log reverently, looked out to see the boat coming back with one end of a towline. The boatmen came aboard and Somby joined them to give orders. The schooner's sails were reefed and the towline made fast to the forward capstan.

"Mr. Darrow told us to man the tow, sir," one of the sailors said. "If it's all right with you, sir. He says she'll tow better with a watch at the wheel."

"Very well," Somby agreed. "And mind you don't touch anything but the wheel."

He made Ritchie oar him back to his own ship. There they found Darrow waiting on deck.

"She's fast, Mr. Darrow. Proceed at full ahead."

Darrow signaled the bridge and the telegraph clanged there. Soon the tramp was making headway on her old course with the derelict in tow.

With his eye watching the skipepr narrowly, Darrow waited until Somby had passed into his cabin. Then he beckoned to Ritchie.

"You say there isn't any cargo below except shell, bos'n?"

"Nary a box or bale, mite."

"But you did spot a couple of diving outfits?"

"That I did," affirmed Ritchie.

Darrow cupped hard lean hands over a cigarette. His voice lowered. "Know what it spells, bos'n? She's a pearler."

Ritchie's eyes widened. "Blime, mite! In that cise maybe she's got a cargo after all!"

Darrow's left eyelid drooped. "Maybe she has, bos'n. That's why I picked Cuttle and Dicksong to stand tow-watch. They'll take a peep in the safe."

The bos'n gave sly applause. "That's usin' yer 'ead, mite. When it comes to peepin' into sifes, leave it to Cuttle and Dicks. They dassent 'old out on old shipmites, neither."

Meaning, of course, that Cuttle and Dicksong were two of eight new hands shipped at Sydney. Ritchie himself was one of the eight—all of them with a background of petty smuggling under the leadership of Reed Darrow.

"Keep this under your hat, bos'n," Darrow directed. "The old man's all right, y'understand, except that he's got old-fashioned ideas."

"Nary a peep 'e'll 'ear from me," Ritchie promised.

Somby emerged from his cabin to announce, "The lad's asleep, Mr. Darrow."

"Must be a tough little devil," Darrow suggested, "to stick it out with the rest of them keeling over."

Somby smiled. "Aye, as hard as nails the lad is. And as game as a kingfish. How's the tow riding, Mr. Darrow?"

"High and handsome, skipper. Come morning and we'll have her yanked out of these doldrums."

"Before morning you'd better change the watch back there," Somby directed.

Darrow grinned. "Right. One watch is

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long enough for any man to ride that morgue."

Somby passed on to the bridge. He stood watch there until eight bells, which found the tramp steaming onward through darkness. The sea was still dead. The tow loomed tall and ghostly back there, an awkward shape under the tropic stars, her bowsprit pitching slightly with each jerk of the line.

Relieved by Darrow, Somby went to his cabin and found the boy asleep. The kit of duffel brought from the schooner now hung on a bunk post here. Somby looked down at the sleeping face and smiled. A good looking kid, he thought. Straight Yankee stock, by the cut of him. Who were his people? Somby made a note to look it up in the schooner's articles.

Rather than disturb the boy, the skipper, for this night, made his own bed on the couch. He was sleeping soundly when the midnight watch changed, and Darrow hove the freighter to.

DARROW did so merely to send a boat and two men back to the towed schooner. The boat returned with Cuttle and Dicksong. Glad enough to be relieved from tow-watch, this pair came aboard and were promptly interviewed by Darrow and Ritchie.

"Did you have a look in the safe?"

"There ain't no safe," said Cuttle. "Only a sea chest. We took a look there and everywhere else. No shiners."

Darrow looked his disappointment.

"If she's a pearler," Dicksong chimed in, "she didn't make any haul this trip."

"Yer wouldn't 'old out on us, would yer?" challenged Ritchie.

Darrow made sure of it by searching both men.

When they went on to the fo'castle he turned with a grimace to the bos'n. "Well, that's that. No pearls."

"And no salvage," grumbled Ritchie. "Time what that tub brings is divvied up, it won't fetch each seaman a beer."

"No use crying about it, bos'n. It just wasn't our turn to be lucky."

Darrow went to bed, arising at dawn to find a stir of wind and a mild chop on the sea.

Somby joined him at breakfast. Fletcher, the engineer, came up grimy from below and sat down between them. These three were the tramp's only officers.

Fletcher emptied coffee from cup to saucer and blew on it. "The kid sleep well, skipper?" A genial old-timer with a slight limp, Fletcher had made steam on this freighter for many years and was close in Somby's confidence.

"Aye, Fletch," said Somby. "And if I know boys, he'll be up with an appetite any minute."

"His folks," asserted Fletcher with his mouth half full, "ought to be ashamed of themselves. No business sending a kid that young to sea."

"Here he is now," Darrow announced, looking up with only casual interest. The boy from the schooner was framed in the saloon doorway. A thin little chap with nice brown eyes and a straight back. The officers observed that he carried his kit—an old canvas bag knotted at the top and bulging at the bottom—in hand.

The skipper greeted him heartily. "Morning, son. How do you like steam?"

"It rides steady, sir. Thank you, sir."

The manliness of him appealed to both skipper and engineer. "Join us, lad," Somby invited, "and cook 'll dish you up some porridge."

Instead the boy advanced with his canvas kit and unknotted it. His sun-scorched little hand delved within. "I've got my cap'n's cargo here, sir. Will you keep it for me, please?"

Darrow's big florid face, indolently inattentive a moment ago, became suddenly alert. He saw the boy's hand come out with a fat buckskin sack.

The boy handed it to Somby. "My cap'n passed it on to me, sir, just before he—" He winced as painful memories came back to haunt his brown eyes. "He said I ought to keep it in a safe place, sir."

With Darrow and Fletcher looking on, Skipper Somby emptied the sack upon the

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table before him. A heap of pearls gleamed there—a magnificent bounty reaped from the sea by the schooner *Fairhaven*.

CHAPTER II

IN RECEIPT OF PEARLS

ACOUNT of the pearls came to more than three hundred. Most of them were small, but a few were of commanding size and brilliance. All were apparently without flaw and just as they had come from the sea.

Fletcher whistled softly. "Number one naturals or I'm a Dutchman!"

Reed Darrow sat perfectly still and said nothing. Somby, glancing up after the count, surprised an avid calculation in the mate's eyes.

"I'll give you a receipt, lad." This the skipper did, making mate and engineer sign as witnesses. Then he went promptly to his cabin where he locked the pearls in the safe.

When he returned to the saloon the boy was seated there and being served porridge by the cook. The cook's beefy British face showed a flush of excitement. Ritchie stood in the doorway, anxious and fidgety, although as bos'n he had no call to intrude at the officer's mess.

To Somby it was clear that word of the pearls had already spread over the ship.

"Take it easy, lad," Fletcher said. He sat with a comradely arm about the boy's shoulders. "Don't bolt it all down in one swallow."

"And better stay in bed a day or two," advised Somby. "You've been through a right stiff squall of trouble, young man."

"I'll have a hammock swung for him, forward," Darrow put in.

Somby didn't quite like the gleam in his eyes. He said quickly, "Never mind, Mr. Darrow. After what he's been through, he deserves better than a hammock. So I'll just keep him in my cabin till the next port." With a fortune in pearls in the cabin, Somby was thinking, an extra pair of eyes to watch there wouldn't be amiss.

Darrow said nothing more until the boy had finished eating and gone. Then the mate turned brusquely to the skipper. "How much do you figure it'll come to—this salvage?"

"I haven't figured, Mr. Darrow."

"Time we start figuring, isn't it?" An edge of truculence tinged the mate's tone.

Of his rebellious nature Somby had long been aware. Reed Darrow had held a master's ticket himself, once, and was used to having his say. He was well educated, a big man with strong, forceful features; a smart navigator, too, yet with a cross-grained streak which warped him, at times, to a predatory slant on life.

"We're due a third of ship and cargo," Darrow argued, "with fair portions to officers and crew."

Somby lighted his pipe, pushed back his chair and then chose his words carefully. "There are points, Mr. Darrow, which maybe you haven't thought of."

"Such as?"

"In the first place," advanced Somby, "maybe an Admiralty court won't call that schooner a derelict. After all she was never abandoned. One of her crew, although only the cabin boy, was found alive on the bridge."

"What of it?" Darrow challenged. "She had distress rags up, didn't she?"

The skipper continued puffing with complete composure. "I'm better at riding out a hurricane, Mr. Darrow, than I am at sea lawyering. But here's something else. Maybe an Admiralty court won't call those pearls cargo. We didn't find them in a safe or hatch. They were in a boy's kit. Same as his jackknife and shirt. Maybe the court'll call it personal property. If it's personal property, it's not cargo."

Darrow retorted bitterly: "The pearls *are* cargo. Any fool'd know that."

"Careful there!" warned Somby.

But the mate rushed on without restraint. "The brat'd 've rotted there, wouldn't he, if we hadn't picked him off and the pearls with him. No use talking like an old woman, skipper." He was standing now, the veins of his neck swelling with resentment.

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Somby looked up at him and spoke quietly. "Go to your quarters, Mr. Darrow. You're relieved from duty. When you feel like making me an apology, come out and do so."

The command jolted Darrow. No one, not even a skipper, had ever so rebuked him before.

Again Somby's quiet voice lashed him. "Did you hear me, Mr. Darrow?"

Fury consumed Darrow. He glared for a moment, then whirled and stamped out of the saloon.

Somby tamped out his pipe. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely to Fletcher. "But no deck is big enough for two masters."

The engineer agreed vigorously. "Right you are. And you can depend on me if it comes to trouble."

"It won't come to trouble," Somby insisted.

Yet at heart he wasn't so sure. He could depend on Fletcher, yes. But on whom else? Certainly not on any of eight roustabouts taken on at Sydney by Darrow.

That left only Fletcher and four stokers.

TAKING double duty through the day, Somby was keenly aware of tension growing aboard. The crew stood about in groups, whispering. They were taking sides, Somby knew. And the popular side would be Darrow's.

Darrow did not appear all day. But more than once Somby saw the cook take brandy to the mate's cabin.

Three lengths aft rode the schooner *Fairhaven*. That barnacled old tub wasn't worth a quarrel. But the pearls were. At least Darrow thought so. And Darrow, oiling his sulk with brandy, was stirring up trouble. Somby was sure of it when he caught Bos'n Ritchie, half tipsy, slipping out of the mate's cabin. It angered the skipper. A bos'n had no business drinking with an officer in quarters.

"Stay out of there," Somby admonished sharply.

"The mite," Ritchie whined, "'e called me in there 'imself."

"What for?"

"'E just arsked if I'd like a gime of cribbage. 'Im an' me's old shipmites, yer know."

Ritchie went shuffling down passage toward the aftdeck. Somby stared after him, not for a moment suspecting definite instructions just given the bos'n by Darrow.

"It looks bad, sir," Fletcher suggested nervously at supper.

"Nothing we can't weather," Somby answered. "Same time I'm taking no chances. We'll shift the course and head for Suva to ship another mate and deck crew."

Somby himself took the eight to twelve bridge-watch, setting a course for Suva. Word of the new course went quickly to Darrow. The seaman Dicksong poked his close-shaven head in the mate's cabin to report it.

Darrow was stormy drunk by then. Again he cursed Somby for an old woman of the sea. "A hatful of pearls, and he wants to jip us out of salvage!"

"What's more," whispered Dicksong, "he figures on beaching the whole lot of us at Suva. Cook heard him say that to Fletch at supper. It ain't fair, if you ask me, him ditching us like that after we pick up this windfall o' pearls."

"Go send the bos'n in here," raged Darrow.

Dicksong returned later to report: "The bos'n won't come. He's scared of the old man."

"To hell with the old man!" Darrow tossed down another brandy, then went out into the passage way. He lurched back to the afterdeck to find Ritchie.

Skipper Somby came wearily off watch at midnight. On the way to his cabin he glimpsed a seaman named Buford. Buford, he knew, was supposed to be on tow-watch. What was he doing here on the freighter?

A suspicion came to Somby then. That at the last relief no new tow-watch had been posted. Darrow could have passed out such instructions through Ritchie. With what object? It might be that Darrow wanted to keep a maximum of his own crowd here on this deck, to back him up in any clash with Somby.

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Somby's mouth tightened. Always he had a straight-from-the-shoulder way of meeting crises. Definitely he couldn't let a mate who was confined to quarters give out orders to the crew.

So the skipper now went sternly to Darrow's cabin. He found it empty. Here was something else which could not be overlooked. It meant deliberate disobedience, since he had ordered Darrow to stay in quarters.

THEN voices came from the afterdeck. Somby hurried down the passage and looked out there. Under a lantern, and assembled around a broached keg, he found half his crew. Darrow, sitting on the keg, was orating. He was flushed and bellicose, pounding a fist into palm as he drove home his viewpoint.

"It wouldn't be only a third, men, if I was running this ship. I'd take all and divvy with the crew."

"Fat charnce of gettin' even a third, now," chirped Ritchie. "The blarsted sea lawyers 'll tark us out of it."

"Damn all sea lawyers, I say," Darrow said thickly. "Fair salvage is fair salvage."

Somby might have retreated. If he had done so, pretending neither to see nor hear, the whole trouble might have blown over. But it wasn't in Somby's nature to retreat on his own deck.

He strode without hesitation into the group. They were cowards, he knew, every man of them except Darrow. And he himself must deal with the mate.

"I told you to stay in quarters, Mr. Darrow."

The mate stood up, faced him sullenly. The others, startled by the skipper's intrusion, began backing toward the rails.

A strain of silence, with the only two strong men aboard standing eye to eye, and with Darrow wavering between surrender and defiance. Loss of face before these men stung Darrow.

"I like it out here on deck, skipper." The mate's lips drooped insolently.

"Step lively to your quarters, Mr. Darrow."

Darrow did not move. He stood truculently at bay, and Somby, a head shorter and thirty pounds lighter, advanced to enforce the order. The skipper's fist drove out sturdily to Darrow's mouth. Blood spurted there. Darrow felt it warm on his lips and lashed out, blind with fury, at Somby's jaw.

The skipper sidestepped. As Darrow rushed in again, Somby tripped him and the mate toppled to his back on the deck.

"To your quarters, Mr. Darrow," Somby repeated quietly. "Do I have to drag you?"

Darrow came to his knees, livid. Gun metal in his hand flashed in the lantern's light as he fired twice. The crew stood backs to the rail, shocked breathless. A boy forward in a cabin heard the shots and came running. He arrived to see Skipper Somby stumble a step toward the mate, then collapse dead across the afterdeck hatch.

CHAPTER III

CHILD OF THE SEA

A CHILL gripped the men who stood by. Not one of them would have dared go that far. Talk was cheap. But not murder.

Now they must either yes Darrow or oppose him. Weaklings, waterfront wastrels, not one of them had the spine to oppose Darrow. The mate, standing there with the gun in his hand and aflame with the temper of his crime, was like white-hot iron amidst wisps of straw. His challenge came hoarsely, "Anybody got any objections?"

He glared from man to man until at last Ritchie piped nervously, "'E 'ad it comin', mite."

Dicksong licked his lips and looked uncertainly toward Cuttle. Cuttle gave a sickly nod. In times past this mate had connived with them at petty smugglings. This very night, before the crisis, they had echoed him to the last whisper. It left them no choice but to follow him now.

"Over the rail with him," Darrow ordered.

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Still they stood muscle-bound and staring. Darrow with a whip in his voice singled out two of them. "You, Cuttle. And Buford. Over the rail with him."

Cuttle and Buford picked up the victim and slithered him over the rail. The act aligned them forever as co-conspirators with Darrow.

"Where's Fletcher?" demanded Darrow.

"'E's below at the engines," piped Ritchie. "The watch is chingin' down there."

True, the midnight watch was changing below. Two stokers going on duty as two came off.

Darrow whirled sharply to Dicksong. "Bolt the door at the top o' the engine-room companion, Dicks."

Dicksong winced. "Listen, mate," he protested, "you're not gonna—"

"Not if they stand in with us," Darrow snapped. "They can take their choice. In the meantime let 'em toast their shins on the stokes."

"But look, mite," exclaimed Ritchie, pointing. "Yer forgot somethin', didn't yer?"

Darrow followed his finger. There at the aft end of the midship passage, aghast and petrified, stood the salvaged schooner's cabin boy. In the heat of mutiny the mate had forgotten this boy. Yet there he was, a fact and a witness.

As the boy met the mate's inflamed eyes, he turned and scampered forward.

"Wot abort *'im?"* whispered Ritchie.

"Leave him to me," came savagely from Darrow.

The madness was still on him. He dashed into the passageway and gave chase. He saw the boy dodge into the captain's cabin. The door slammed and the bolt clicked on the inside.

To be eluded so easily all the more inflamed Darrow. His fist smashed the glass of a framed fire-axe there in the passage. He snatched the axe and crashed its blade into the door. Hacking furiously, all he could think of was the stretching of his own neck—a fate inevitable if the boy ever reached port.

The door splintered. Darrow battered through and in.

No man in the crew followed him. Here was something they wanted no part of. If it must be done, let Darrow do it himself. The group of them cringed in a pack aft, as Darrow blasted his way in there with an axe.

The mate himself was just in time to see the boy's legs disappear through the cabin's fourteen-inch porthole. Only a slim boy could have slipped out there. The porthole gave directly to the sea. Darrow put his head through it, saw the boy's head bob in the waves. A swell smothered it from his sight as the lad drifted aft past the moving ship.

Darrow's instant and natural reaction was relief. It was better that way. Drifting off in mid-ocean, there wasn't a chance for the witness to survive.

WITH the axe still in hand, Darrow turned and his eye fell upon the safe. As first officer, often required to use the safe in routine traffic at ports, Darrow knew its combination. Deftly he spun the knob of a dial and the safe door swung open.

The buckskin bag of pearls was there. Darrow transferred it to his own pocket. A step in the passage. Quickly the mate shut the safe door and re-locked it.

A pallid bos'n came sidling in. "'E went overboard, mite. I seen 'is 'ead bob in the sea!"

Darrow nodded, thumbing toward the open porthole. "He slipped out there just as I came in."

Ritchie gulped. "'E'll feed the blarsted sharks, 'e will. It's 'ell, ain't it, mite?"

Darrow appraised the bos'n narrowly. Ritchie was a fool, he thought. So were the rest of them. Right now, while they were too scared to think, was the time to outwit them.

"The boy had something in his hand," the mate said, "when he dived through the port. Looked like the bag o' pearls."

The bos'n's jaw dropped. "The 'ell 'e did! 'Ow could he get 'old of 'em?"

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Darrow shrugged. "How would I know?" He opened the safe and no pearls were there. "Looks like the old man crossed us up. He must 've put 'em some place else, and the kid knew where."

"And 'ere we are, 'oldin' the bl**rsted bag!" groaned Ritchie.

He went disgruntled to the afterdeck to break it to the others.

Darrow stepped across to his own cabin. There he quickly concealed the pearls in an old sea-boot. Then he joined his men aft, with the axe still in hand.

Ritchie had broken the bad news. But consternation over the plunge into mutiny still held the crew in a spell of submission. They turned for consolation to the already broached keg.

The engineroom crew, Darrow learned from Dicksong, were locked below. They could be dealt with later. In the meantime what about the towed schooner? The mate looked back at the tall gray shape of it. That schooner itself, he realized, was a witness which couldn't safely be towed into port, it would need to be explained.

There was a hazard, too, if another ship should pass them by day and see the schooner in tow. "We'll cut her adrift," announced Darrow.

To this there was no dissension. Now that it was too late to back out, any and all hazards must be cut adrift.

"Signal the engineroom to heave to," Darrow directed.

The signal was clanged from the bridge. With nothing to lose by heaving to, the crew below deck obeyed.

A boat was lowered. With the axe still in his hand, Darrow embarked in it with Cuttle. Over a mildly swelling sea the two men rowed back to the schooner.

No tow-watch was posted there tonight. Darrow had seen to this, to give himself a maximum of backers on the tramp. But the rope ladder still hung from the rail.

Cuttle stood by in the boat as Darrow climbed to the schooner's deserted deck. The mate descended with his axe into the aft hatch. His purpose was to scuttle the ship. If left adrift she might be sighted and again given tow by some other steamer.

The mate began chopping with his axe. Let her sink! Never sighted, there'd never be any inquiry. Hacking a hole below the waterline didn't take long. The sea spurted in and drenched Darrow. As it swirled about his boots he sprang for the ladder. He scurried up and out through the hatch. The axe was still in his hand and he dropped it now on deck. It was a tool of crime—so let the axe sink too.

Cuttle was shouting to him from the boat. "We better hurry back, Mr. Darrow. Looks like she's comin' on for a blow."

The swells were higher in a stiffening wind as Darrow joined Cuttle in the boat. Cuttle rowed him ahead to the freighter. Darrow boarded there and went directly to the poop. With his knife he slashed the towline. "Full ahead," he bawled then to the bridge.

Off up the dark sea steamed the freighter. The schooner, unleashed to the waves and wind, drifted swiftly astern. She was sinking stubbornly. Rollers combed her deck. And still she floated, drifting with the run of the swells.

The water came rail-high, then bridge-high as the *Fairhaven* drifted on back and far beyond sight from the fast-fading tramp. The ascending swells submerged the bridge-deck, then the binnacle, then the chartroom. Only the mainmast showed now.

One by one its crossarms dipped below the sea.

Only the dim tropic stars saw a drenched figure clinging there. A frail forsaken wisp still here to share the *Fairhaven's* fate was her cabin boy, crawling up from crossarm to crossarm as the drifting derelict submerged.

Diving through the tramp's porthole he had found himself, a moment later, knocking against the towed schooner. A rope ladder hung there for the changing of tow-watches. Desperately the boy had snatched for a hold. Valiantly he had pulled himself over the rail to hide once more from the menace of Darrow.

Now up the mast he clambered. He

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perched forlornly on the tip of it as the sea rose to engulf him. Far up the wind he could see the tramp's deck-light grow dim and disappear. The next swell all but swept him away. Yet tenaciously he clung to his tip of mast as the schooner settled to her last harbor in the sea.

THE sudden jar unseated him. But he kept his grip on the mast even when a great comber rolled down the fast-running sea to smash in smothering tumult over his head. The roller passed and he was in a deep trough with nearly half the mast exposed. The trough was engulfed as another roller filled it. Another trough, then another bulge of sea. Gradually he became aware that the ship no longer sank. The mast was still. He himself was still. Only the waters moved, heaving, sinking, and constantly driving by.

He knew, then, that she'd struck. The keel had lodged on some submerged reef. Such reefs, he knew vaguely, were not uncommon in these tropic seas. Many of them were spotted on the charts and traffic steered clear of them.

It meant, he thought dismally, only a short respite. The schooner would break up any moment. Or at least the mast would snap off before the run of the sea.

He looked out to dark starry horizons. No land in sight. Without a lifebuoy he couldn't last long when the mast snapped off.

Buoys were below him, he knew, fastened to the deckhouse walls. Taking a deep breath, he dipped below the surface and went sliding down the submerged mast. His feet struck the deck, far down. He knew every inch of this deck. Groping, his hand touched the cabin's outer wall where lifebelts hung in rows. Pressure of depth made his head roar. Desperately he disengaged a buoy from its hook and was all but strangled when it came loose.

The buoyancy of the buoy shot him to the surface. He reached out to the tip of the mast and again clung there, looping the buoy over his shoulders.

Exhausted from the effort he waited for the mast to break off. The sea still ran over and by him, each swell drenching him anew, each successive trough leaving him perched high and clear like a bedraggled little ape.

Rough knocks had been his lot, all through his short life, and he took them now. Only dismal memories lay behind; his childhood on the San Pedro waterfront; the pinched poverty of his early years; parents eternally quarreling; a hard drinking father who beat him and a mother who had died, at last, of ill nourishment and a broken heart. These things came back to the boy now, cuffing him with no more sympathy than did these lashing waves.

One other thing, too, he remembered. There'd been a seafaring uncle who, occasionally through his childhood, had stopped by to tell tall and alluring tales of his travels. That was why, at ten, the boy had run away to sea. He had hoped to find his uncle's ship at Melbourne—but had missed it. Instead he had found berth as cabin boy on the *Fairhaven*.

To haunt the boy now came a less distant and even bleaker memory. Ten days of deadly doldrums on the pearler. The thirst. The blistering deck. The siege of death there. The awful glaze of that still and lifeless sea.

Life was in the sea which ran now. A current with direction, swells which rolled and even raced toward dim unknown curtains of the night. Why not go with it? This mast couldn't last long. Or if it did, why cling here to await thirst and starvation?

Tomorrow the sea might be still. Tonight, while she ran high, why not let her take him where she would?

The boy made the life belt secure about his waist. As the next roller came, he released his grip on the mast and let the wave sweep him away. He rode, then, up and down, on and on, stifled at times, sputtering, a chip of fate on the current of the sea.

From infancy water had been his element. Brought up without leash of dis-

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cipline on the San Pedro beach, swimming and riding surf had always been his amusements. He knew what combers did to you, and how to brace for each smashing impact. He met them now, skillfully, gamely, sweeping on with them through the night.

The wind steadied and swells became ragged chops, frost-white under the stars. The boy relaxed as he rode them, twisting at times to keep his face to leeward. Hope stirred faintly. When day came, some passing ship might see him adrift. Who knew? Or he himself might sight a shore. Ten thousand islands lay in dots about these coral seas.

WHEN day came he could see neither ship nor land. But the wind still held—a faithful constant trade wind from the northeast; the racing cappers still carried him on.

When the sun was high he felt thirst. The heat of it fired on his bare head and burned his hope to ashes. His mouth seemed stuffed with brine-soaked cotton. He grew listless. His chin slumped. He no longer twisted to keep his face from the wind.

Then clouds. A gale which sent him even swifter down the sea. Thunder. A squall of rain came dashing aslant for brief minutes. Water ran in warm sweet drops down the boy's face.

Then it was gone, and the clouds dissipated. But the few drops saved him through the day. Leagues he must have drifted, by now, from that tip of mast. Night came on and still he could see neither ship nor land.

Darkness and the trade died down. The sea was almost calm now. Thirst came to torture him again as the boy drifted slowly on. The full moon at zenith marked midnight; by then he was barely conscious. The belt was under his armpits now. His chin dragged water. As the boy's senses became more and more sluggish only an instinctive resistance made him spew out brine.

His stomach sickened.

A roaring came toward dawn but it seemed to be only in his aching head. A hurdle of white spray ahead seemed to be just one more chop in the cappered sea. Then the boy's knees scraped sharp edges. They cut at him like blades, cruel and cunning, and the roar grew deafening. A giant white comber smashed him flat and his hands gripped the hardness of coral.

In the beginning of a new day he sprawled there with spray pounding him. It was only a rib of coral which, in the overlapping surf, he couldn't even see. Bluer water lay beyond. Serene water with no curling white crests. As the day brightened the boy could see a steep greenness a bare league further on.

He raised to his elbows. Land! The boles of its shore palms were like tiny sticks, in the distance, leaning toward the sea with tufted banners waving him on.

But there was no curent to carry him across that blueness. If he made it, he must swim. Fresh, a three-mile swim would have been play. Now he was exhausted and burning with thirst.

He *must* make it. The boy clung on hands and knees to the coral there, resting, bracing himself as each incoming sea battered him. He slipped off the lifebuoy. From here on it could only encumber.

When he struck out swimming, he did so too eagerly. The paradise promised by those leaning palms was too alluring. It inspired him to heroic strokes, and to a spurt far past his failing strength. His arms grew feeble. Everything deserted him but the will to go on.

Then a mesh of brownish seaweed, or something like it, rose up to entangle his legs. This, with the shore so near, was the final irony. The boy fought the mesh desperately, floundered helplessly in its clutch and failed to extricate himself. For the last bitter time he spewed out brine.

Now even the will to go on left him. His spirit wilted and he went down—

FROM the palms ashore came native fishermen. Tall brown men bare from the hips up, women and girls in bright *tapa*-cloth *lava-lavas*. The taller men

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waded into the lagoon, while the women pushed off in *paopaos* toward the wide arc of a net. The cord of the net was home-made from fibers of coconut hull—a brownish tangle which might easily have passed for seaweed as it bellied far out into the lagoon.

Each sundown it was set there, to be drawn in at each dawn. To the task now came happy, carefree islanders chanting songs of their own lore. There were lithe young girls bedecked with flowers, black-eyed and brown-limbed daughters of the sunlight with loose hair cascading to their girdles. Tiny chubby children ran naked from the bush to watch the catch brought in. *Paopaos* were paddled expertly out, while men waded to their necks at the net's ends.

The net was pulled to the beach. Song and chatter stopped then, giving place to a hush of awe. Fish were in the net, as always—but something strangely human was there to. A white boy! Dead, he seemed. Washed in by the sea.

The circle of Polynesians closed in and the men stooped to release this fantastic catch from the mesh. A child of the "cloud-bursters," as white men were called here. His bruised body, they found, was neither stiff nor cold. The boy was filled with sea water and unconscious, but life was still warm.

A young chief set vigorously to work on the boy's arms, swinging them in full arcs; another did the same with his legs; another began chafing the boy's chest and forehead. A young girl of about the boy's age came running up with a gourd of cool spring water. She squirmed through the circle with it and poured it on his face.

"Bring a *niu,* Vaila!" an older woman cried.

The little brown girl went scampering for a *niu.* Up the sloping bole of a coco palm she went, agile as a monkey. At the fronds she broke off a green coconut and came sliding down with it.

When she reached the boy his eyelids were fluttering. "He does not die!" her people were chanting. They were all glad because death, a thing of evil, had not come to them in the net. The boy opened his eyes to see a little girl bending over him, holding a green coconut to his lips.

"Give him milk from the *niu,* Vaila," they shouted.

She had cut a hole in the end of the green hull and through the shell beneath. She pressed it now to the boy's lips and he sucked at fresh sweet milk.

It was like waking from a dream. He saw a joyous people all about him, some of them singing, some of them dancing on the beach. He could hear distant breakers, but the sound was soothing now. To one side he could see trees and flowers and trailing vines. Closest of all was the little girl with dark hair and skin of a rich rose-tint brown.

Her small round face, anxious at first, broke into a grin of delight when his eyes opened.

More of them came to kneel by him, chattering words he could not understand. But he knew they wanted to help him. A primitive people, but kind and friendly he saw. It wasn't like the deck of that tramp freighter, where men killed each other. Here he could feel the touch of gentle hands and smell the perfume of flowers.

From the bush came an aged chieftain, whose long staff and ornate fly switch proved him of higher rank than the others. His hair was fiery red from long years of covering it with lime while fishing at sea in the sun. A man of great dignity, this. The others made way for him.

The old man advanced to the white boy and looked down benevolently.

"Tamasami," he said gravely, giving a name to the newcomer.

It wasn't long before the boy learned that "Tamasami," in Samoan, means "Child of the Sea."

CHAPTER IV

TWELVE CHANGES OF THE MOON

IT WAS the season of ripe mangos when Tamasami came to the island of Niu. Twelve times the moon changed before

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they ripened again. Tamasami kept his calendar only by watching the fruits ripen, or by months of cool trade winds which followed seasons of hot, breathless rains, or by the runs of bonita beyond the reef.

Inevitably the life of Niu became his own life and its people became his people. The standards of its living became Tamasami's. From the outset he was popular. The women of the village petted him, nursed him speedily to strength. Faipule, the venerable chief who gave the boy a name, took him to his own distinguished *fale.* It was only a long oval shelter with a floor of crushed shell, and with a thatch roof supported on *pandanus* poles; yet its five rafters and its five stone steps marked the rank of Faipule and gave prestige to all of his household.

For Tamasami it was home until the mangos had ripened eleven times.

He was in the vigor of tall manhood by then. Skilled in all the island craft, no native son could dive for shell or scale a coconut palm or scoot a bonita boat out through the reef more expertly than Tamasami. A standout and a leader, the young man whose skin was a shade lighter than their own drew respect from the chiefs and sighs from the village maidens.

He absorbed all the island's lore and culture and became schooled in its traditions. They were Samoan culture and traditions although Niu, he soon learned, was not part of that political group known as Samoa. Its people had simply migrated here, generations ago, from one of the Samoan islands. "It was before the cloud-bursters came," the old men told him. And he learned that when the first white explorer had appeared on the horizon, the people had cried out, "Look! the cloud-bursters!" For the ship had seemed to burst through the clouds.

Of his own background the others knew little. At first his lack of the island language kept him from explaining more than that he was the last survivor from a ship of the cloudbursters. And by the time he could speak the language, other motives ruled him. He was happy here by then. Nothing to do by day except swim and chase rainbow fish in the bay. Nothing to disturb him by night except when he had to run out and throw stones to drive away noisy fruit-bats from the mangos near his *fale.*

He could do as he pleased. He was never hungry. No ruffians cuffed him about. And some warning instinct whispered that if the race from which he came knew he was here, they would come to take him away.

Tamasami more and more did not want to leave this pleasant land. He remembered white men as a predatory breed from whom only sorrow came. So on rare occasions when some tramp steamer dropped anchor in the lagoon to trade calico for shell or copra, the white boy kept aloof from it. He did not join the natives who always swarmed in canoes, with welcoming songs, about the ship.

AS HE reached maturity, it became time for Tamasami to leave Faipule's house and build a *fale* of his own. He chose a site well inland on an eminence, where he could still catch the trade winds from the sea and yet where there were no banana trees to breed mosquitos. He graded an oval floor there and paved it with shell.

"It shall be a fine house, Tamasami." A slender Niu girl stood shyly by as he worked the shell to the smoothness of sand. She wore the head dress of a *taupo,* with circles of shell and bright berries at her breasts and with bare feet peeping from the hem of a tightly-wound, scarlet calico *lava-lava.*

Tamasami dropped his grading log and went to her, taking her cheek between his hands. "It shall be our house, Vaila."

A glow suffused the cheeks and she leaned forward to rub the tip of her nose against his. He laughed. "It is more delightful this way, Vaila," he corrected, and demonstrated by kissing her lips.

"It is the way of your people, Tamasami?"

The smile left his face. "My people are your people, Vaila." He did not like it

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that she always remembered he was a cloudburster.

They were of an age. Just eleven years ago this same girl had held a *niu* to his lips as he lay half-strangled on the beach. Almost at once she had become his favorite. That they would marry some day, neither had ever doubted.

"When you are no longer *taupo,*" he promised again now, "we shall live here together."

"It shall not be so long, Tama," she answered. Meaning that her term as *taupo,* or village virgin, would come to an end and be taken over by a younger girl already being groomed for that honor. A *taupo,* by tradition, could not be married. She must always be on hand to preside at ceremonies, to lead the *siva* dancing and to mix *kava* for the chiefs.

Tamasami understood that tradition perfectly. He would not have changed it. The same world bounded them both and he was content to wait.

"We shall live here in happiness, Vaila," he exulted. "We shall have many sons and daughters. Our sons will be chiefs and the most beautiful of our daughters will be *taupo*. When we are old they will hoe the taro for us and bring us fish from the sea."

"You will never leave me, dear one?" Her arms entwined about his bare brown shoulders and once more he kissed her lips.

"I shall never leave you," he promised.

Releasing her he resumed work, erecting posts at two pace intervals about the rim of his *fale*. The sun shone hotly and his torso was soon gleaming.

"Rest, Tama," she urged, "while I bring you a *niu.*"

He would have stopped her, such a task being beneath the dignity of a *taupo*. But already she was shinning the tall slanting bole of a coco palm. Only her hands and bare feet touched the tree as she literally walked up it, agile and graceful, to the fronds.

A few *popos,* or ripe brown nuts, were there. But Vaila selected a *niu,* or green one. And she tossed it down to Tamasami.

He caught it, pared away the hull and cut a hole in the shell. Vaila slipped down the bole and faced him on the ground, kneeling. Each sipped cool milk in turn through the hole. It was, on this island of Niu, a way of pledging faith between lovers.

THE girl turned then and saw trailing smoke far at sea beyond the reef. "A ship comes," she announced.

He looked out to sea with a faint furrow creasing his brow. "Who cares, Vaila?" Ships brought back harsh memories which were better forgotten.

Shouts came from the village and they saw its people running to the beach. A score of canoes would be launched, Tama knew, the minute the ship dropped anchor.

"You go join them, Vaila."

"I like best to stay here with you, Tama." She knew that he never went out to meet traders.

Hand in hand they strolled to a vantage high on the hill and sat down in the shade of a *fau* tree. With her head on his shoulder they watched the ship come in.

It was a dingy tramp, as usual, and dropped anchor amid a circle of *paopaos.* Bags of copra and shell were taken aboard while cloth, beads and small tools went down into the *paopaos.*

"It is a grand ship!" exclaimed Vaila. All the ships she had ever seen were like this one.

"But no," Tama protested, "there are other ships much finer than this. When I was young I saw many on the seas."

He probed into the dim recesses of his memory to tell her about great liners, oilers and colliers, ships of bright paint and many funnels. "I have seen ships of six decks, Vaila, each with more people than on all our island."

She marveled. "But where would so many people go?"

"They go from one country to another," he answered sagely. "Why? Because they are fools, Vaila. They are never satisfied, like our people here."

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"Why," she persisted, "are they not satisfied?"

He considered this soberly. His thoughts went back to Reed Darrow and all the other white men he had known. "I think, Vaila, it is because they want what they call money."

"Shillings?" she prompted. "Like the English use over at Tulofa?"

He nodded. "Shillings and dollars and pearls."

"Then why should they come here?"

"They take our copra and use it to buy shillings and pearls."

"Does it make them happy, Tamasami?"

To this he shook his head with profound assurance. "It makes them very unhappy, Vaila. They are always fighting. For shillings and pearls they kill each other, then go trading for more."

She sighed. "I should hate to live with such people, Tama."

They remained there, at lazy ease, all through the afternoon while the villagers traded at the ship. Vaila was more than willing that her lover did not go out there. For in spite of his assurances, deep in her was a lingering fear that some day he might go away on a ship. Other white men, she knew, had stayed long in these islands only to go away, in the end, on some tall ship. And they did not return.

Old women of the village had told her of beachcombers, in times past stranded here. Some of them had married girls of the island. All of them were gone, now. It must not be so with Tamasami.

When the sun went down they saw a boatful of seamen coming ashore. Tamasami was not pleased; for he knew what it meant—an evening of feasting and revelry in the village guest house. It meant too that the High Talking Chief would send for Vaila.

In a little while the girl was sent for, and Tama was left alone. As *taupo* she must mix the *kava* and lead the dancing for guests.

Tamasami, from a distance that night, heard ribald laughter from rough men. He drew nearer in the darkness, resentfully watching. A dozen ill-kempt and bearded seamen sat cross-legged on the guest house floor, under the lighted candlenuts. Facing them sat as many heads of village families. Only men were seated. Women entered only to serve, on plates of banana leaf, fruit and fish and half-cooked pig. Tamasami heard coarse jokes, in English, gibed in derisive deprecation of this food. It irked him. These white men were hypocrites and ingrates, he thought, as were all white men. They ate your bread and made fun of you in one breath.

Cheaters, too. Because when feasting was over the inevitable exchange of gifts began. The sailors gave their hosts each a cheap jackknife or a package of cigarettes. Island courtesy made return gifts mandatory. So upon the seamen were bestowed *tapa*-cloths of rare design and a bounty of grass mats.

Each time when a ship came Tamasami had seen this. Always, he had noticed, the white men got finer gifts than they gave.

TONIGHT, when gifts had been exchanged, the chiefs ordered a *kava* ceremony. Vaila appeared with a wooden bowl and sat with her back to the *taupo's* post to grind the root which made *kava*. When it was made, she served it in a coconut cup to each guest.

Again the derisive ingratitude which angered Tamasami. "Dish water!" he heard a sailor sneer, and then draw a brandy flask from his own hip.

Tama was almost sorry he remembered those few words of English. Certainly he wanted nothing to do with such a discourteous race.

The *siva-siva* began then. Three boys came in with guitars—rich treasures of the village bartered from a trading ship years ago. Within a circle of sailors, young islanders began dancing in threes. Two boys and a girl. Or two girls and a boy. There was a great chanting of songs and clapping of hands. The *kava* flowed freely. Each dance waxed faster and more violent than the one before.

In grand finale, as always, came the

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taupo dance. Vaila appeared for it, covered from head to foot with garlands and in a flaming head-dress of feathers. She danced alone. Always a *taupo* danced alone.

Slowly at first, then faster, her head thrown back, knees slightly bent, her hands and arms weaving like live serpents, her bare feet padding flat on the shell. The tempo quickened and the singing pulsed to a lilt of frenzied ecstasy. The white men cheered and themselves began clapping time with their hands.

Tamasami, watching from a breadfruit thicket without, drew closer. Vaila's dancing always thrilled him. To him it expressed every good and perfect ideal of this, his beloved island. Vaila, he thought, had never been more enchanting. He knew too that she wasn't trying to charm these white men, that she was dancing merely to perform her ceremonial duty as village hostess.

The din of song and clapping was too intense to let Tama hear much else. Only the flickering candlenuts made light. Then a raucous, drunken voice pierced the din, bawling out, "Swing it, baby!"

A bulky deckhand lunged forward, his arms snatching brashly for Vaila. The native singers stopped, shocked. It was sacrilege even to touch a dancing *taupo*. This brute of a cloudburster did, though, crushing her in his arms. He was pushing her boorishly about the floor when Tama dived in and caught him by the neck.

Tama jerked the man back, stood for a moment glaring a fierce rebuke into the sailor's eyes. Then Tama's open hand lashed out with a blow which sent the man reeling.

Tamasami did not wait to see him fall there. Instantly he picked up Vaila and rushed from the *fale* with her cradled in his arms. He continued running, through thickets of breadfruit and *papayas*, on far into the bush.

He put her on her feet, there, then turned, staring defiantly back through the night.

Distressed voices called from the village: "Vaila! Tamasami!"

"The chiefs will be angry, Tama," Vaila whispered.

Yes, the chiefs would be angry. Tomorrow they would scold Tamasami. Any affront to a guest, whatever the provocation, was considered unpardonable.

"Are *you* angry, Vaila?"

"With you I love I can never be angry," she said.

"Then what do I care for the scoldings of Faipule?"

"The white man was a beast, Tama."

"All white men are beasts, Vaila. I am not of them. I belong to you and to Niu."

To prove it Tamasami, instead of kissing her lips, touched only the tip of his nose to her own.

They waited there, under a moon which hung above them like a great golden breadfruit, until voices had stopped calling. Waited until they heard a dip of oars and knew the sailors were returning to their ship.

Then Tama took the girl to her parents in the village. "I am sorry," he said. "It shall not happen again."

It did not happen again because Tamasami, thereafter, was more than ever careful to keep away from white men. More than ever he distrusted them. Seafarers especially he avoided. And no other kind ever came except on annual occasions when a few British officials came over from Tulofa, for what they called a sanitary inspection.

Niu was only a narrow rib of the sea and far isolated from the group which held political mandate over it. Its product was so slight, and its gentle population gave so little trouble, that official inspections were always perfunctory and brief. A quick round of the village, a sampling of the drinking water to see if it contained germs, an interview with the High Talking Chief to see if any hospital cases need be taken over to Tulofa—and the inspectors were gone.

Only once did an inspector come face to face with Tamasami. He saw a handsome young man with strangely Saxon features and yet otherwise quite like the rest of

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them. A half-caste, the inspector supposed, deserted by some beachcombing father.

His interest arrested passively, the inspector asked, "Who are you, boy?"

"Tamasami."

"Part white, aren't you? Were you born here?"

"My blood is pure," the boy answered, "and I belong to Niu."

It was as near as the Britishers ever came to the story of a white boy grown to manhood on this island.

CHAPTER V

IMPERISHABLE MAST

YET sometimes a mysterious call whispered to Tamasami, impelling him to go back and touch that from which he sprang. It was an impulse which he did not understand, and which he could not confide even to Vaila. When he disappeared upon occasion for a day and a night, the girl had no faint idea where he had gone.

Always it frightened her. Inevitably it made her remember those tales the old women told—of other white men who had come to live and to love, and yet who in the end had gone away forever.

Tamasami, when the urge took possession of him, always launched his *paopao* and put to sea. Sturdy, practised sweeps of his paddle sent him rapidly beyond the barrier reef and on out, far from the sight of land.

Always he came to a tip of mast sticking from the water out there. By a strange freak of kindness the sea had preserved, in rotting skeleton, the wreck of the schooner *Fairhaven*. Hurricanes had missed this sunken derelict. Fashioned stoutly by New England craftsmen, her mainmast still kept stubborn anchorage to the frame below. A tough ship, the old *Fairhaven,* with her keel still fast in the clutch of a coral crevice, defying time and decay through the years. At this Tamasami had marveled. Wrecks, he knew, usually broke up quickly. Yet old men of the sea had told him of exceptions; of persistent survivals like this one; of a hurricane-wrecked cruiser off Apia, for instance, still looming like a tortured rock after forty years.

With like tenacity endured the wreck of this old pearler, the tip of her mast still showing above the waves.

Mooring his *paopao* to it, Tamasami again perched himself on the mast's top. It was a tryst he kept, from time to time, with his all but forgotten past.

Desolate memories which came to him there made him swear never to come again. Pictures of poverty, brutality and famine. His own wretched childhood on the San Pedro waterfront. Surly, drunken sailors on the wharves. A bully mate aswagger on a quarter deck, gun in hand, eyes aglow for shillings and pearls.

He'd never come here again, vowed Tama; but always he did. At first through curiosity to find if the mast still withstood buffetings from the sea. Then gradually with a sense of unconscious pride that it did so, holding out staunchly in all weather. After all she was his own ship—this sunken argosy of his boyhood ventures. Twice derelict, twice abandoned by all save his own despairing spirit.

Still derelict; and so he himself still, upon occasion, must stand by on the tip of her mast.

On his first visit here, when first he had dared venture out alone in a *paopao,* details of the old schooner's accouterments had been fresher in his mind. She had been equipped with tools, he knew, capstan bars, pikes, mauls and the like. Tools less crude than those used on the island of his adoption. And so the boy, taking a deep breath, had climbed down the mast under water to the deck. Groping, he had found nothing but a coil of rotting rope.

It proved worthless. Yet the salvage had inspired him to further efforts. Through subsequent years he had salvaged a few tools, odds and ends of metallic equipment from the deck. Back on the island, he had polished away rust from these implements, keeping them to use in the *taro* patches or at the building of *fales* and *paopaos.*

His prize salvage was an old brass sea chest, water-tight. Many dives it had taken

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to retrieve this. At last he had fastened a line and later had hoisted it aloft to his canoe. In it, he found when he had cruised ashore, were a compass, a sextant and a set of "ship's articles." The articles represented terms of employment by which the schooner had shipped her last crew.

Now, in his twenty-first year, there was nothing detachable left below which was worth salvaging. Trips to the tip of mast had become purely pilgrimages of sentiment. Yet still he made them. Often the tropic sun burned down so fiercely, as he perched on the mast, that he covered his head with lime. It was an old trick of the islanders—putting lime on the head to avert sunstroke. Samoan fishermen, far to sea after bonita, had been doing this for many generations.

The effect of the lime was to bleach hair from black to red; in the end to a fiery red, like Faipule's.

The hair of Tamasami, bushy black in his teens, was already tinged to auburn. He wanted it that way, for it made him a true islander. It matched the gleaming bronze of his flesh as he perched there, a child of the sea, on the mast tip of a lost harbor.

OTHER masts than this one kept to sea. Endless horizons made tracks for them, vessels of sail and steam, some gliding, some plunging, all of them driving at full ahead toward a harbor of ships.

Far north and east of Niu, a congestion of shipping hugged the wharves of a golden-gated bay. Masts and funnels were there. Great liners, battleships, tankers and yachts rode at moorings against a skyline of bridges and eucalyptus-crowned hills and steel towers. Ferries wheeled by them from shore to shore. Roaring to them down the planking of piers, traffic came trucking with cargo for the seven seas.

The blue-ringed funnels were all of a single line. A number of these were in harbor, all berthed at a battery of piers abutting blue-trimmed warehouses. The tall building just beyond, near the foot of Market Street, wore stripes of blue masonry at each of its eighteen floors. In a blue circle above its entrance a brass sign announced:

REED DARROW STEAMSHIP LINES

The owner of the building, as well as of all Blue Ring shipping, sat in his top-floor office reading an item of marine news. It was an office of extremely modern design and furnishings. The man at the desk was big, bold-featured, ruggedly handsome except for a too florid coloring, and just now dressed with the elegance of an admiral on parade.

His broad, sloping shoulders gave a shrug of impatience. Then he laid the news sheet aside, arose, crossed to a chart on the wall, stared at a spot in the lower Pacific. His lips took a sardonic twist as he stood with legs wide apart—legs which had balanced him on many a pitching deck.

In a moment he moved to a window, looked out and down across the bay. The twist of his lips curved to a smile when he saw masts and funnels there, many of them his own.

What difference did it make—that spot on the map? Reed Darrow, once a bully mate, had come a long way from that spot. He was a tycoon of shipping now. His was a name to conjure with, in Frisco, Shanghai and all way points west, even if his hands did still bear callouses from capstan bars.

The Blue Ring was a new line, short on traditions but long on cargoes. Its fleet of modern freighters to the Orient was already a nightmare to competitors. And on the side Darrow still maintained a few small South Seas trading bottoms for the copra trade, although he took no pride in them and did not dignify their funnels with blue rings.

"Skyrocket Darrow," shipping men called him. And his career had indeed been rockletlike these past eleven years. Few men knew his background. Yet here he was, at the top of the heap. Starting with the the stake of a poke of pearls, boosted along by luck, sagacity and sharp dealings, Reed Darrow had snowballed one success upon

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another until now he lacked only the triumph of social recognition.

That, too, would soon be his. Recent headlines had left him in a ruddy glow: SHIPPING MAGNATE TO WED NOB HILL SOCIALITE.

A light glimmered at his desk transmitter now. Darrow stepped to it, pressed a button, heard a secretary announce from the outer suite: "The Misses Cameron calling."

"Please show them in," directed Darrow.

He smiled. Always it pleased him for Celeste to call at his office. It made him all the more sure of her. Here he was master. Here he was at his best. At her house, amidst guests of refinement, he was sometimes conscious that the rough edges of a bully mate were apparent. But never here in this chromium-trimmed office from which he could overlook his own decks in the bay.

Pointing them out to Celeste preened his ego. But why must her kid sister tag along? The kid sister didn't approve of him, Darrow knew.

THE door opened and the two sisters came in. Celeste of fragile mold and delicately pink, Roberta with the free swing and assurance of an up-to-the-minute co-ed. Of ages to be mother and daughter, they had the same yellow hair and blue eyes and the same charm which had always distinguished the Cameron women.

Darrow advanced eagerly and took both of Celeste's hands. She smiled up at him. "It was so generous of you, Reed dear. I couldn't help dropping in to tell you."

"Generous?" He pretended not to know what she meant.

"I mean the perfectly splendid check you sent for the charity hospital."

"Oh!" He gave a disparaging shrug. Actually he had no faint interest in charities. He had sent the check purely to impress Celeste, after noting that she was chairwoman of the committee.

"You're *so* thoughtful, Mr. Darrow!" inserted Roberta.

Her emphasis irked him, for he knew what she meant. This youngster, he sensed, could read him easily. She had an overly sweet way of complimenting his grand gestures, and always the compliments stung.

She was fighting him under cover with every breath, Darrow guessed.

Roberta perched herself on the chromium-trimmed desk and lighted a cigarette. Through rings of smoke her eyes searched Darrow, probing deep. Damn her! thought Darrow. Why couldn't she leave them alone?

Best to ignore her. Still retaining both of Celeste's hands, he said urgently: "Listen, Celeste, what about a weekend cruise down to Monterey on the *Flying Fox?*"

Celeste shook her head with genuine regret. "I'm sorry, Reed; but we can't. It's Roberta's twentieth birthday, you know. And she's having a crowd down from Stanford."

Roberta added: "And so we need Celeste for a chaperone, you see."

Darrow grimaced. It was just a ruse of Roberta's, he thought, to rob him of Celeste. "Up to now, Roberta," he said almost bitterly, "you've done all the chaperoning yourself. And plenty of it."

The girl laughed. "Oh anyone could chaperone Celeste. She's so adorably innocent."

Darrow, biting his lip, turned back to his fiancee. "It's disappointing, Celeste. After all I built the *Flying Fox* just for you, you remember."

"It was dear of you, Reed," she acknowledged.

Untrained in the nicer conventions, Reed Darrow had even presented her with the yacht, the *Flying Fox,* as an engagement gift. Another of his grand gestures. She had declined, of course. A lady, she had explained, could accept from her fiance a ring but not a ship.

As a compromise he had given her a key to the yacht's guest cabin. It was a room designed lavishly for her own exclusive use. Celeste had accepted the key and on several occasions had occupied the cabin with Roberta on coastwise cruises.

To Celeste, Darrow seemed a strong,

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self-made man of the sea. Herself a descendant of rugged forty-niners, she had from the outset been attracted by the dominant, pioneering drive of Reed Darrow.

Into her quiet, empty life he had brought a ruthless, thrilling force—excitement, vitality, the compulsion of the conquering male.

She saw him, Roberta was sure, through dark glasses. To the younger girl, eighteen years Celeste's junior, the situation was no less delicate than exasperating. Delicate because Celeste was extremely sensitive and easily offended. One couldn't go about airing one's opinion of a sister's fiance. Exasperating because Roberta wanted to do just that. On one occasion restraint had slipped and she had burst forth with: "Do you know what he reminds me of, Celeste? The name he gave to his yacht. It fits him exactly. He's a high-flying fox. And you, my dear, are Little Red Ridinghood."

THE outburst had all but estranged them. Roberta had to watch herself now. Yet she realized clearly that Celeste had a good deal to learn about life and men. Roberta was devoted to her sister; Celeste had raised her from a baby. Attending invalid parents, too, had helped to cheat Celeste of her own youth. Romance had passed her by until to her now, at inexperienced spinsterhood, had come Reed Darrow.

"We mustn't keep you from your work, Reed," Celeste said. "Come, Roberta."

At the door Darrow boldly kissed his fiancee goodbye.

Roberta saw her sister blush. An odd analogy made her say carelessly to Darrow:

"Is there really such a thing as a fox that flies?"

Roberta knew the answer. She knew most of the answers. Only yesterday she had looked up this particular one in an encyclopedia.

But Darrow was caught off guard. And he liked to parade his wisdom before Celeste.

"They're as common as pigeons," he told Roberta, "in the South Sea islands."

"Flying foxes?" the girl prompted innocently.

"They call them that. Really they're monster bats. Fruit bats. Bodies the size and shape of an opposum, ugly black beasts with huge, ribbed wings. They can fly anywhere—"

"Oh, I see!" broke in Roberta. "They're monster bats that prey on fruit!"

Her narrowed eyes fixed upon the peach pinkness of Celeste's cheek. "How odd! Come, sis." She took Celeste's arm and they went out.

Not until they reached the street did Roberta's anger die.

After ushering them to the elevator, Darrow returned to his office. Immediately he resumed the perusal of an item of shipping news at which he had been interrupted.

Somehow it disturbed him now more than before. Possibly, he thought, it was because of the clash with Roberta.

For a moment that was not entirely pleasant, Darrow found himself swept back over the years, as if carried by a long, swift roller breaking on the beach. Once more he stood on the derelict's deck, the ringing of his axe against her timbers throbbed in his ears. He felt the wetness below his knees where he had stood in the hold watching the waters flood heavily into her. His arms were aching, too. . . . Then with a start he came back to the present. He had to act.

In a moment he spoke through the transmitter to his outer office.

"Phone down to pier 67. If Ritchie's boat hasn't left yet, ask him to step in."

In less than an hour Ritchie came in.

"Loaded?" Darrow asked him.

Ritchie nodded. "We're weighing anchor on the next tide, Cap'n." He was the same sly little ex-bos'n with whom Darrow had once shipped on a tramp. The captaincy of Darrow's smallest and dingiest South Seas trading boat was Ritchie's now—a sop tossed to him for reasons best known to Darrow.

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"Take a look here, Ritchie." Darrow clipped out the item of shipping news and handed it over.

RITCHIE saw that it reported a tip of mast protruding above a submerged reef at a given latitude and longitude in the South Seas. The reporting vessel had taken a look, passing along an opinion that it was the wreck of an old pearler, the *Fairhaven,* which had disappeared eleven years ago. The comment was purely editorial, remarking on the oddity of a wreck enduring that long in the sea, and yet listing a dozen other instances where foundered ships had held together even longer.

Ritchie looked up from washed-out eyes. "Well, wot of it, Cap'n?"

Darrow drummed thoughtfully on the desk. "I'd just as soon that mast wouldn't stick up there, Ritchie. It's what you might call, well—a thorn in the conscience."

Amusement quirked Ritchie's lips. "Dawn't mike me laugh, Cap'n. Yer ain't got no conscience now, and yer never did 'ave one."

Darrow took this. Ritchie, in a way, was a privileged character.

"Call it a dangerous advertisement, then," suggested Darrow. "A tip of timber advertising the wreck of a pearler. Somebody might think pearls are still in the schooner's safe. And go down there diving, or to raise her to the surface."

"Well, wot if they do? They won't find a blarsted thing, Cap'n." And he smiled.

"Who knows what they'll find, Ritchie? For instance, when I bashed in that keel with an axe, I dropped the axe. The name of my own tramp was etched on the axe-blade."

"Rusted by now, Cap'n."

"Rust can be polished away," insisted Darrow.

Thinking it over for a moment, the ex-bos'n chuckled. "It'd mike a bloomin' liar out of you, wouldn't it, Cap'n? You didn't report no contact with that derelict. So if yer own axe was found aboard her, and a 'ole 'hacked through the keel, they'd know—"

"They won't know anything," Darrow broke in, "if we eliminate the advertisement. That position's not far off your course, this trip. So stop by and break the mast off. Let it float away. Then there won't be anything left to mark the spot."

Ritchie scratched at the stubble on his chin. "Wot'll my crew think, Cap'n? They're all 'ornest seamen, yer know."

"Use your head, Ritchie. Tell 'em you're just getting rid of a hazard to shipping traffic."

Ritchie grinned his approval. "You're a smart 'un, Cap'n. It's as good as done. Easy, too. I'll just 'ook my tackle to that mast and start the donkey. Off she'll come, the mast will, like a rotten chip."

He sidled out and Darrow dismissed the matter from his mind.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acid waste in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be over-worked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of poisonous waste.

When functional kidney disorder permits poisonous matter to remain in the blood, you won't feel well. This may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

If you have trouble with frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning, there may be something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(ADV.)

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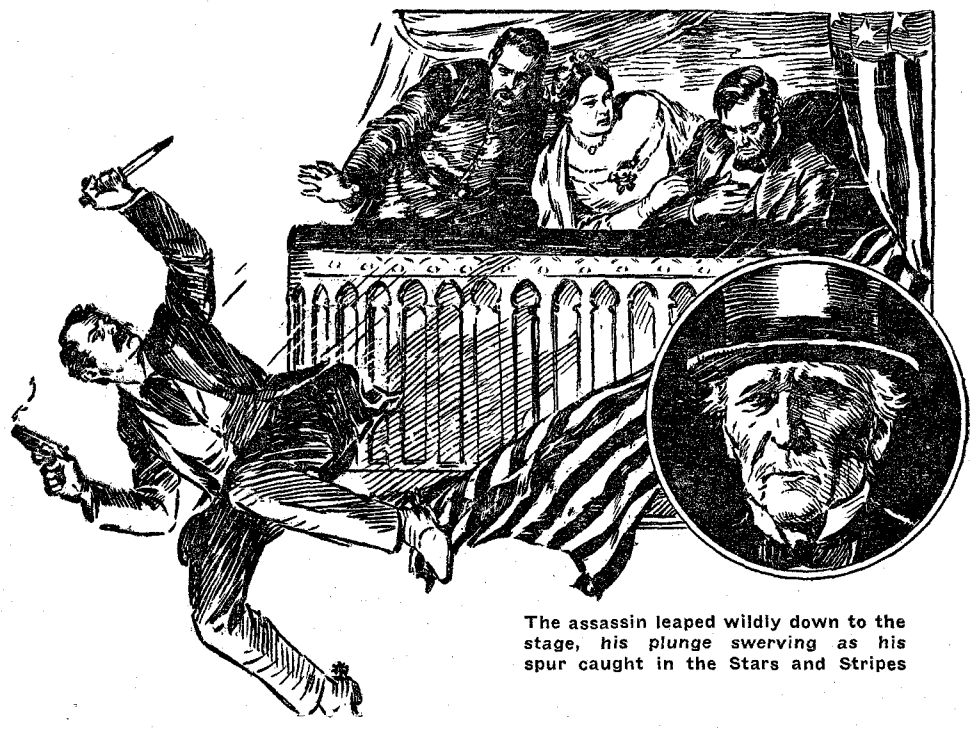

The assassin leaped wildly down to the stage, his plunge swerving as his spur caught in the Stars and Stripes

The Man Who Hated Lincoln

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "Ghouls' Paradise," "Frivolous Sal," etc.

There are those—and wise men, too—who say that the foulest crime in the history of this nation never has been solved. But if Booth had escaped, would he not resemble this ugly old man who bore the telltale scar on his brow? A Complete Four Corners Novelet

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The author wishes to assure the reader that the shocking sentiments expressed in this story are by no means his own, but those of the old man fictionally portrayed. It is perhaps well (if unpleasant) to remember that every President of the United States has been subject to mud-slinging, whispering campaigns, lies, invented scandal; the greater the man, the more violent these calumnious attacks.

Lincoln, too, was bitterly and unjustly assailed.

The history as herein recorded by the young research-worker in the story—the astounding incidents appertaining to and following Lincoln's assassination—are set down as facts.

For the remainder, the story is wholly fiction. But the author (even as the young writer in the story) is inclined to believe in the possibility of Booth's escape. Certainly the case wears a shroud of mystery that has never been quite dispelled, and among the Poeish aspects is the strange trail of misfortune which followed many of those (witness the suicides of Senators King and Lane) who had the slightest connection with Booth.

Collectors shunned his effects and

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burned his letters. Actors crossed their fingers at his name. Showmen who have attempted to exploit his so-called mummy have been visited by fires, failures, hold-ups, accidental shooting. And in the midst of writing this story, the author, in pursuit of a page of manuscript blown from his veranda table, crossing the most innocent of all possible lawns, slipped on the grass and sprained his ankle. Let us hope the reader is immune to any similar baneful influence. . . .

—T. R.

I

THERE is a place in the country where I never want to visit again. Follow a certain state highway north of Albany, then macadam in the general direction of Canada, and presently you are in the neighborhood. The town is Four Corners, at the end of a blue valley redolent of hay and clover and piney woods—contented cows, silos and that sort of scenery. Perhaps the landscape sounds prosaic, but it's a little farther off the beaten track than that—the ski trains and tourist routes go to sportier Placid and Montreal; the natives still run to types like David Harum and Eben Holden; in season there are barn dances and husking bees, and some of the grandmas still churn their own butter.

Which isn't to say it's "hick," for the farmers and villagers own radios and automobiles, and their ideas on politics and picture stars are just as opinionated as any Broadwayite's.

But it is "out of the way"—which means its people are individualists, hard-bargaining and independent, honest, democratic, tough-fisted, quick to stand up and fight for what they believe is right—about as close to 100% Yankee as you'll find anywhere in the country. And if you climb the dirt road from Peterson's Mill going north over Blackberry Hill, you'll find yourself in an early American wilderness — deer and beaver and occasionally bear—uncut timber pretty much as it was when the Indians left it.

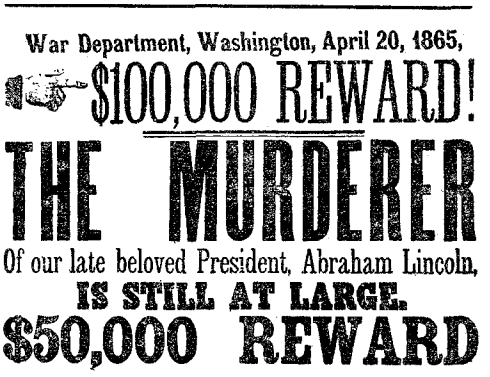
I was told to take the wagon path at hilltop, left of the iron foundry—that the house wasn't far. But the dirt road was steep for my car; near the top I blew a tire on a flinty stone; and I didn't reach the iron foundry until late afternoon.

The woods were silent with late September shadows, and after I delayed to inspect the crumbling ruin of the iron furnace, a relic built in pioneer times, I felt a little dubious about the wagon path through the trees. There was only the ghost of a wheel-track, ruts almost obliterated by weeds and underbrush; as I stood in indecision, a red fox came out of a thicket, looked at me startled, vanished like a whisk of air.

The abandoned smelter, the silence of woodsy shadows and the spectral appearance of a fox emphasized a feeling of loneliness that had grown on me as I'd climbed the valley-side. Little patchwork farms below and the village roofs at valley's end seemed miles away. The faded wagon road dipped into a leafy gloom that was like a permanent evening, and the deep-hushed quiet of the forest was a little disturbing after a lifetime used to the *slam-bang* of the city.

But I didn't want to waste my afternoon, so I steered into the woods; sent my roadster wading the brush and weeds. Dark timber seemed to close a succession of doors behind me as the trail joggled and wound; sapling branches whipped at the windshield; stones rattled under the fenders; soon the ruts degenerated into pot holes and muck in which the car threatened to bog down.

I don't know why that trail made me nervous, but I began to wish I hadn't come.



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Those woods had swamped an iron foundry; a car didn't belong there. Something about the old gray trees made me think they didn't want their quiet interrupted. After a mile or so, I was darting uneasy glances back over my shoulder, apprehensive of something I couldn't explain. With the latening afternoon there was a queerish suffusion of peach-colored light drifting down through branches over the road; shadows under the trees were cobweb-gray; a sudden murmur of thunder somewhere over the valley had me gripping the steering wheel in alarm.

I didn't want to be caught in those woods in a rainstorm, and I was looking for a place to turn the car when I saw the house.

It was a shadowy cabin at the bottom of a twilight-filled hollow; a woodsman's shanty so tumble-down, vine-grown and squalid in aspect that at first I thought it uninhabited. Shutters hung on the windows in crazy angles; the chimney was half gone; the porch sagged in dilapidation and one drunken sidewall was propped up by a buttress of moss-covered posts. The window in the front door was boarded over, and the door itself looked as if it hadn't been opened for several years. I was almost sorry to see a thin upward trickle of chimney-smoke, a signal that the occupant of this hovel was home.

Leaving the car, I picked my way up a briar-clawed path to the weedy porch. The doorstep, I remember, was matted with toadstools, and it was a minute or two before I could bring myself to knock. At least five more went by before I heard an answering footstep. I had an uneasy feeling of eyes watching me through shutter-cracks. A quick wind-gust crossed the hollow and sighed off through the trees. The gloaming darkened. A spotted frog jumped from under the doorsill and bounced off across the porch, and I would have turned and hurried back to the car if my insatiable hunter's instinct hadn't held me to the chase.

So I knocked again. I was hard on the trail of America's greatest criminal. . . .

BOOTH shot Lincoln. On April 14, 1865, in Ford's Theatre in Washington. Where the war-weary President had gone to witness a farewell performance of *Our American Cousin.*

Lincoln, his wife Mary, their son Tod, and a young Major Rathbone, and the major's fiancée, Miss Harris, were in the presidential box. Shortly after ten P.M., Booth made his way into the box, shot Lincoln in the back of the head, snatched out a dagger and gashed Major Rathbone in the arm, then jumped down to the stage—breaking his leg in the leap—brandished the dagger and shouted, *"Sic semper tyrannis!"* Hobbling madly through a rear door of the theatre, the murderer escaped on horseback, fled Washington and was caught twelve days later by angry Federal troopers at Garrett's barn near Port Royal, Virginia. The barn was fired; Booth ran out and was promptly shot; Lincoln was avenged. So much is schoolbook history.

What isn't common to the schoolbooks is the startling web of mystery surrounding the case—certain facts neglected by the pedagogues in their hurry to reach the Twentieth Century. Lincoln's murderer was commonly regarded as an egotistical ham actor who, mainly inspired by alcohol and vanity, flitted across the front page of history for one flaring, evil moment, then sank into limbo as the perpetrator of America's foulest crime.

There is some evidence to the effect that the assassin was motivated by a lust to be in the spotlight. John Wilkes Booth was the son of Junius Booth, and his brother was the great Edwin Booth—both his father and brother overshadowed him on the stage. As a boy he was handsome, arrogant, bad-tempered, spoiled; of the famous theatrical family, he was the least in ability; his first performance in the theatre ended in a fiasco of catcalls.

Determined to equal his brother, he improved his acting to a considerable degree, and in his early twenties became something of a success. Records show that Booth was earning twenty thousand a

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year at the height of his career, but his brother Edwin was the idol of the day, recognized as one of the world's leading tragedians; John Wilkes never matched him in skill or popularity. It is possible that in killing Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth thought to center the public attention on himself—a frustrated egotist madly jealous, enflamed with desire for notoriety.

But there was more behind Lincoln's murder than the publicity-cravings of a matinée ham.

The original scheme had been to kidnap Lincoln, Grant and several members of the Cabinet, and deliver them behind the Confederate lines. This plot was bigger than John Wilkes Booth. It had been hatched in Canada by a group of conspirators, Confederate agents harrying the North from secret headquarters in Montreal. John Wilkes Booth was one of them.

The Civil War had divided the Booth family; Edwin was a Northern sympathizer; John Wilkes favoured the South. It was later disclosed that John Wilkes Booth was the member of a spy ring operating in Northern territory. As an actor, professing allegiance to the Union, he was able to move about freely; boasted that he had a pass signed by General Grant. A cloak of mystery descends about the man during 1865, but it was proved that he made secret trips to Canada and held rendezvous with the Southern conspirators. Could their pay have been the source of his large income?

Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox smashed the kidnap plot while Booth was in Washington doing groundwork for the scheme. About him he had gathered a motley quartet of henchmen—one John Surratt, whose mother ran a lodging house where the plotters met; David Herold, a feeble-minded druggist's-clerk; George Atzerodt, a Confederate spy; Lewis Powell, a hulking youth who had served in the Confederate Army.

The combined mentalities of these four would not have rated much above grammar school; Booth played the lead. But Lee's surrender stole the show.

The South had given up.

Was Lincoln's assassination a last desperate attempt to wreck the Federal Government? The work of a publicity-mad egotist deprived of his grandstand play? Or was it something far more cunning, a machination as complicated as a spider-snare—a flower of evil with its roots underground in Lincoln's own government —a plot fostered by certain Northerners who wanted Lincoln out of the way so that they might bleed the conquered South?

RECENT investigations in the case, documents brought out of dusty archives, old testimony examined in the light of modern history have turned up an astounding controversy. Historians have found evidence which indicates collusion, treachery and double-dealing worthy of the murderous diplomacy of the Borgias. Booth must have had more than four hirelings; must have had assistance from higher up.

On the night of the assassination all the telegraph lines out of Washington were put out of commission. By whom? Herold, Booth's dim-witted lieutenant, was heard to say that Booth had working with him thirty-five men. Who were they; why weren't they run down? How did Booth enter the theatre in the first place; get past the doorguard into Lincoln's box? Why wasn't the President of the United States, especially in a time of turmoil, heavily guarded?

When Booth sprang from the box to the stage, catching his spur in a flag and falling heavily, he broke his leg; how could the injured man so easily have made his way from the theatre?

For twelve days the United States Army, hundreds of Federal detectives and a nation of aroused people were unable to locate this crippled actor. Who sheltered him during that time? Taking into account the bad roads, the lack of telephones, the poor means of communication, one must also realize the killer's getaway would be slower and that the

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countryside was alive with soldiery quick to notice unidentified travelers. Yet this fleeing horseman with his broken leg crossed the main bridge going south out of Washington unnoticed and unchallenged. Certainly he must have been protected by someone high in authority.

In view of modern police methods, one considers other facts as astounding.

The lone policeman picked for the honorary post of guarding Lincoln's box was a defaulter, a heavy drinker, a man with one of the worst records in the Washington force. He was not on the job when Booth crept into Lincoln's box, yet he was never prosecuted in the later trials. Booth's diary was found and turned over to Stanton, Secretary of War, but it was never introduced as evidence in the trial of the other conspirators—years later it was taken from a pigeon-hole in the War Office, and it was discovered that many pages had been torn out.

Why did Stanton pigeonhole the diary?

Powell, who had tried to murder Secretary of State Seward, and Herold, who had followed Booth to Garrett's barn, were caught; as were Atzerodt and the mother of John Surratt. These four were tried, convicted as accomplices, hanged in Federal prison. A doctor who had unwittingly set Booth's leg was banished to an island to die in exile. Wherewith the hundred thousand dollar reward for the murderers was distributed, and the case was closed.

But the echo of that fatal pistol-shot went on. Study the Lincoln case, and you will be astounded by the long list of suicides and insanities which followed the tragedy. It was as if the very shadow of John Wilkes Booth blighted those on whom it fell.

Poor Mary Lincoln went insane.

Major Rathbone, Lincoln's escort in the theatre box, went mad and killed his fiancée, Miss Harris, shortly after they were married.

Boston Corbett, the cavalry sergeant who claimed to have shot Booth at Garrett's barn, was later made doorkeeper of the Kansas legislature, one day he locked the door, pulled an army revolver and began shooting at the men in session. Overpowered, he was hurried to an asylum.

Secretary of War Stanton (who had directed the hunt for Booth and then pigeonholed the actor's diary) died under a cloud in 1869; a rumor that he had committed suicide by cutting his throat was denied by his relatives, but the claim still persists and has never been disproved.

Many efforts were made to reprieve Dr. Mudd, the unhappy physician condemned to exile for setting Booth's leg; after years of island confinement, his sentence was commuted as unjust, and he died on the verge of freedom.

Lawyers believed that the death sentence passed on Mrs. Surratt by a military court was too severe; a committee attempted to call on President Johnson to have the sentence commuted to life imprisonment. Senators King of New York and Lane of Kansas took it upon themselves to frustrate the petitioners, blocking the door to the president's study and forcing the committee to leave. A few months later Senator King committed suicide by loading his pockets with lead weights and jumping off a ferry boat in New York Bay. In 1866, Senator Lane killed himself in Kansas.

THE aftermath of Lincoln's murder was a-foul with such creeping mysteries. There were accusations, hints, implications, counter-accusations. Even Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's vice-president, was accused of complicity; Booth had left his calling card at the vice-president's hotel the day of the assassination.

Seen in retrospect, the entire case presents an incredible aspect of intrigue and skullduggery; it is plain that Booth must have received aid from some camarilla high in Washington authority, and there are historians today who claim that the master minds behind Lincoln's assassination were never uncovered.

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Most astounding of all is a rumor that John Wilkes Booth, himself, was never captured. A story that he made good his escape and some substitute was shot in his stead. That the hundred thousand dollar reward was paid over as hush money, and Lincoln's murderer, protected by higher-ups, got off scot-free.

Admitted the assassin must have had secret protection, it does not seem beyond possibility that he could have been spirited away. For twelve days he had avoided capture. He was supposedly recognized by the farmer in whose barn he took refuge, but what if this Virginia farmer were part of the plot?

It was night when the Federal soldiers surrounded the barn, and with a hundred thousand dollars at stake, imaginations can be quickened. David Herold, Booth's dim-witted accomplice, ran out of the barn when the shooting started, but his idiotic cries that Booth was inside might have been an attempt to divert the soldiers. The barn was fired; in the uproar of flame, smoke and darkness a figure ran out. Instantly this fugitive was riddled.

One can believe the fugitive's features were shattered as the excited troopers emptied their guns into his dead body. History tells us there was a dispute over the identification—Booth's personal physician, brought to examine the corpse, made a first statement that it wasn't Booth. Was some pressure brought on him to alter this statement afterward? Years later when the body was exhumed for burial in the family plot other witnesses declared it was not Booth, but relatives insisted it was John Wilkes and the matter was hushed.

Meantime there was a rumor that Booth had been seen alive in Bermuda; statements that he was hiding in England, that he was living in France. In 1902, a niece of Edwin Booth, traveling in Oklahoma, was terrified by the visit of a strange man who called at her lodgings one night, cried, "Don't you remember me; I'm John?" then fled as she slammed the door in his face.

As recently as the World War the rumors that John Wilkes Booth was alive persisted, and today there is a carnival traveling in the West which features a mummy, purportedly that of Booth—a self-confessed suicide who died in 1903 in Oklahoma—the identification supported by a thousand affadavits—a weird curio for speculation, and at least an indication of the credence given the story of Booth's escape.

What an astounding reversal of history if this rumor were true! Lincoln's murderer allowed to go free! America defrauded of justice! Our greatest national crime still unsolved!

AS A HISTORY student and a writer, I had been fascinated by the mystery of John Wilkes Booth for years, and after considerable research I had become convinced that Booth's escape was more than a possibility. I read Otto Eisenschiml's book, *Why Was Lincoln Murdered?* I read Izola Forrester's, *This One Mad Act.* I burrowed into dusty archives and pored over faded affadavits, asking myself why the soldier who supposedly shot Booth should have gone insane, why the strange aftermath of suicides among Northern politicians. Was it a stooge who ran from Garrett's barn that long-ago night? Was John Wilkes Booth sneaked into the West, or hustled to England on some secret ship? And if he did get away, by what means? When? Where?

Gathering copious notes, statements, descriptions, evidence of collusion and police negligence, I decided to write up the whole astounding case, and with a historical bombshell in mind, I set out to trace the assassin's movements from his Civil War days as an informer and Confederate spy. Digging back into history after a man is difficult at best; tracing a spy whose trail was a secret in 1865 made an almost impossible task. But little by little I picked up the time-buried threads—a letter here—a memory there—by horseback he had made a trip to

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Montreal—it was this long-ago trail to Canada that brought me into the neighborhood of Four Corners.

I had not expected to stay. Only long enough to service my car and pass the night at the village inn. It was the hotel-keeper who set me off on a tangent. Entering my room with a bottle of Scotch, he spied over my shoulder at the notes on my desk. "See you're writin' a book."

"History," I explained. "About Lincoln's assassination."

"Well, naow!" he gave me with a Yankee twang. "Come here to interview the Old Man?"

"The Old Man?" I asked. "Who's the Old Man?"

"Why, the Old Man," the hotel-keeper nodded. "He's th' hermit feller lives up in th' woods top of Blackberry Hill. Reckon he's been there long as most of us in th' valley can remember. Name's St. Ellen or somethin' like that, but we call him th' Old Man count of he must be close to a hundred years old, an' lives shut up there off by himself, reg'lar recluse like. Used to come to town once or twice a year, but y'don't see him much about any more. But I've heard my Pa tell about him. It seems he's a mite touched in th' head maybe; anyhow when I was a boy he use to come to town, go to th' tavern an' get lickered up, start tellin' how he seen th' assassination of Lincoln."

"He saw Abraham Lincoln assassinated—?"

"Yes sir, heard him say he was right there! Want to talk with him about it? You follow th' dirt road north up from Peterson's Mill, then you come to th' old Iron Foundry an' there's a wagon path through th' woods. Th' house is about a mile—"

II

I KNOCKED a third time; then, as the door opened creakily inward, there was a woodenish rumble in the sky, as though the appearance of the man came to answer my knock were being heralded by a distant mutter of drums.

I began, "Are you the—?" and then broke off with a stare.

In the forest twilight I had been unable to discern little more than a shadow beyond the opened portal, but as the figure emerged from the inner cabin glooms, I almost dropped the hat from my hand. Never had I confronted a person as extraordinary!

I don't know what I'd expected of this recluse—the typical back-country gaffer, I suppose, pucker-mouthed and bleary eyed, bent with senility and a little queer from years of solitude. In contrast to that expectancy, the inmate of that hermitage gave me a shock.

Certainly he was old, and certainly he was shabby, but he was more than a little queer. He was tall—the illusion of height effected by a knee-length frock coat that would have been old-fashioned to my grandfather, and a tall, black stove-pipe hat. He was old—so old his face had the polished, skinless aspect of a skull, and his emaciated hands were like pale kid gloves shrunken tight on the fingerbones. The fleshless features of his face were stark white as a plaster cast; wisps of white hair floated about his shriveled ears and wisped from his upper lip in the suggestion of a moustache; his nose was a thin saber with a cold drop glistening at its tip; and my first impression was of a dressed-up skeleton that had just walked out of its closet.

But he was ancient rather than senile, and in his skeletal, black-clad frame I sensed an astonishing vitality.

His back was upright; he posed, rather than leaned, on a silver-knobbed walking stick under his folded hands. His head was erect. And the eyes in the hollow sockets under his low-pulled hatbrim burned at me with a black, vivid intensity that was almost hypnotic. I said my first impression was of a dressed-up skeleton—no, he was more like an animated figure in wax; a bloodless museum dummy in the costume of another period, with a battery in him somewhere to keep him alive, the current lighting his eyes.

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"Yes—?"

He regarded me fiercely as he drew out the word huskily, whisper-throated, so that the inflection of it became almost a hiss.

I had to swallow to find my tongue. "Are you—you're the Old Man?"

He peered at me like a haughty bird of prey. "My name is St. Ellen. What is it you want?"

I fumbled like a house-to-house vacuum-cleaner salesman who had forgotten his lines. A living skeleton named St. Ellen! In an undertaker's frock coat and a stove-pipe hat! There in that lonely tumble-down shanty in the woods! I found myself staring at his walking stick, at the tarnished silver knob, aware that there was something unnatural about this, something that had to do with the old man's eyes and the thunder-mutter in the dusk and a draught of chilliness that issued from the house.

"I don't mean to intrude on you, sir," I said, "but in the village last night I heard about you."

"Ah?"

I could see the "sir" had pleased him. I enlarged, "They told me you were an eye-witness to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and as I'm doing some historical research on the Civil War—"

"You're a historian?"

"Well—"

"You wish to hear about the famous assassination?"

"I—"

"Come right in!" His voice scaled up-key to an E-flat of enthusiasm. I was beckoned through the door with a surprising flourish. The eyes burned brighter black, and the white jaws grinned. If one can imagine a cordial skull—

I KNOW I wasn't whisked through that door, but I seemed to enter that hermitage against my own volition. The door was shut behind me before I quite realized it, and I found myself in a room as incredible as the top-hatted recluse who lived there.

In any background of 1938 that room would have been unbelievable; in a backwoods cabin the thing was a sort of dream. Conceive a parlor of the vintage of 1880—flowered wallpaper, imitation marble fireplace, red carpets on the floor, plaster cupids on the ceiling. Such a parlor crammed wall to wall with the red plush furniture, gilt-legged chairs, horsehair sofas, foostools, cabinets, cupboards, grapevine-framed pictures, bibelots and knicknacks that were rare when grandmother was a girl.

Everything overstuffed. Everything knobbed and curly-cued and garish in lavish bad taste. I remember at least a dozen oil lamps of all shapes and sizes—my host apologized that he was out of kerosene, and the only light was the glow of a few red coals in the hearth—a mantel littered with bric-a-brac—and a score of clocks, grandfather clocks, ormolu clocks, all stopped (I was to sense the significance of that, later) at a few minutes after ten. And that room would have been an antique dealer's Paradise but for the evil chill that pervaded the atmosphere, the soggy dampness that was suffocating as asthma. Every article in the room was peeling, tarnished, greasy with a covering of mildew, infected with the damp rot and decay.

My host saw my eyes. Smiled bleakly. And said squeakily, flourishing the drop from the end of his nose, "Sit down, my dear young man, sit down. You will forgive the cold—it is hard to heat a room with a fireplace, even in September. You are interested in the furniture—? Just a few poor heirlooms I have managed to preserve through the years."

His arm gestured.

I mumbled something polite; stumbled over a chair-rocker and sat down on a sofa that felt squashy as a fat man's stomach. An opened window would have helped, but all the windows were shuttered. The room smelled like a cavern full of dead bats, and I would have smothered in the clamminess but for leaks of fresh oxygen through the shutter-cracks.

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"So you have come here to interview me about the Great Assassination?"

The old man's black eyes bored me as he picked his way through the ruins; took up a position on the hearth with his back to the fireplace. It was the stovepipe hat that made him seem tall; he didn't remove the hat, but tapped it firmly on his skull as he spoke.

I said, trying not to stare at the dewdrop renewed on the old man's nose, "I'd consider it a privilege to hear you tell about it. You must be the last person alive who was in Ford's Theatre that night."

His reaction was as incredible as everything else about him. At my reference to his age, he turned to the mirror over the mantel, regarded his face in the crackwebbed glass, struck back his hair. Rounding on me, he snapped, "A man is only as old as he feels," tartly, adjusting his cuffs in elaborate annoyance.

A man who must be over ninety offended by a reference to his years— it made a creep go up my spine! So did the way he spruced the threadbare strands of his ghostly moustache, twirling the tips with a gesture of decayed elegance that matched the mildewed furniture of the room. Top hat at an angle, stick in elbow, he stood there in the dimness before the fireplace, twisting his moustaches and glaring down at me with all the arrogant condecension one sees in the dim, old portrait of some spleenish ancestor. I made some sort of flattering remark, and he was appeased.

"Yes, I was there in Ford's Theatre," he resumed the subject under inquiry. "I recall that evening very clearly, indeed. One of the greatest episodes of our nation's history, don't you think?"

I said I did.

"And what," his eyes were on me piercingly, "is *your* opinion of the assassination?"

"*My* opinion of Lincoln's assassination?" I was taken back. "Why, the same as everyone else's!"

"And what opinion is that, pray?"

EVERYTHING about this ancient man was queer. For a backwoods recluse he was using none of the provincialisms of the countryside; he spoke with a certain flowery formality that even achieved the trace of an Oxford accent— his phrases as mannered and out of date as the mouldy bric-a-brac on the mantel.

I murmured, "Why, my opinion is that our greatest president was brutally murdered. That it was a dastardly crime."

The glitter in the black eyes went sarcastic. "I thought you told me you were a historian. Making extensive research on the Civil War."

"I am," I said, uncomfortable before this abrupt, incomprehensible hostility.

"Then you aren't very well informed," he told me sharply. "Your opinion is not the same as everyone else's. There were many people who did not consider the killing of Honest Abe a dastardly crime. My dear young man, many people in 1865 quite approved the assassination. As you could easily learn by studying the contemporary speeches and editorials of the time."

I said I knew that various politicians and Radical Republicans in the North had been against Lincoln. "But I think everyone today recognizes Lincoln as the great man that he was, one of the noblest characters in history."

Again the old man's black-eyed glitter went sarcastic. Turning to his mantel, he rummaged through the clocks and statuary; fished to light a tin box full of time-yellowed newspaper clippings.

"Listen," he leaned at me. "If you're writing a history, why not tell the whole truth? And the whole truth about Lincoln is that he was not nearly so godlike as the hero-worshiping historians of this generation have painted him.

"After he was killed at least a dozen ministers in New York City preached sermons indicating it was a fortunate thing for the country. Such statesmen as Ben Wade and Thaddeus Stevens admitted it was a good thing the railsplitter was out of the White House.

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Charles Sumner wondered if Honest Abe's death wasn't a judgment of the Lord. George Julian, a brilliant man, was heard to say the accession of a new president was a godsend.

"Here is a speech by General Benjamin Butler in which he declares that Lincoln's death was a dispensation of God's good providence. Here is another—Ralph Waldo Emerson, asserting that Lincoln might have reached the limit of his usefulness."

He waved the clippings at me, his voice cracking shrill. "There were many who approved the assassination! Many! And those men were Northerners, my dear young sir!"

"But no one today considers Lincoln's detractors worth remembering," I observed. "Wade and Stevens were cheap politicians who wanted to despoil the beaten South. Butler, if I remember my history, was removed from Grant's army for incompetence and graft. As for Emerson and those preachers, I think they only meant that—"

"They only meant that it was a good thing Lincoln was removed from the presidency," the old man stamped his stick on the floor for emphasis. "Come, young man. All this heroic nonsense about Lincoln is sentiment and fiddlefaddle, sugar-coating the true picture. The man was a bungler as President. From the North's point of view, he blundered the army plans by appointing one stupid general after another. To the South, he waged a bloody invasion and turned a horde of black savages loose on the defenseless populace. Today they've made a hero out of this rail-splitter, a martyr! Let me tell you that in 1865—and I remember it well!—the nation sighed with relief to see him out of the way!"

III

MY HOST flung the news clippings back on the mantel, and posed on his stick, regarding me with a beady black twinkle, obviously enjoying my consternation. To say I was consternated by his outburst is to put it lightly. I had not come prepared for any of this. This ancient creature in a stovepipe hat, a hermit who affected a British accent! This grandiloquent hovel stuffed with decayed antiques! Least of all, this denunciation of the martyred President.

It wasn't so much what he said—that Lincoln had many political enemies is common knowledge to the historian—but the way he said it. The malice behind his delivery. The pent-up animosity waiting only for a listener. I had met old men with violent prejudices before, but this ancient had evidently nursed his malice at a white heat uncommon for his years.

I said, trying to steer aside from an argument, "Herndon and other of Lincoln's biographers go pretty thoroughly into the controversy over his presidency. But I haven't been able to find much about Ford's Theatre. I was wondering if you could tell me what it looked like—the play—Lincoln's box—what happened after the shooting—from a spectator's point of view."

"I'm giving you my point of view."

I coughed, "About the theatre, I mean. You remember—?"

"As if it were yesterday."

"What the theatre looked like?"

"Like any theatre."

"The entrance, the foyer," I prompted. "I've seen photographs, but—"

"Ah." He gestured his stick. "It was a square-fronted building, three stories high with five arched doorways facing the street. On Tenth Street, of course, between E and F. Washington was a city of muddy wayfares with high curbs. There were the usual hitching posts and gas lights. We had better theatres in New York City, in New Orleans—"

"You were in the house when President Lincoln arrived?"

His cold lips smiled. "I was there early. A large crowd was in attendance that night, a batch of soldiers and Washington society; the theatre was filled by eight

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o'clock. Laura Keene was playing a benefit performance of *Our American Cousin*. It was not a good play, but quite good enough for Keene. I," he sniffed, "never thought her much of an actress."

"Do you remember how the president's box looked?"

"I tell you, I remember every detail," he said a little querulously. "The box was at the left of the proscenium. Naturally it was over-decorated and pretentious. A partition had been removed to make it larger, and there were easy chairs for the rail-splitter and his party. The railing was draped with a lot of bunting and flags. Honest Abe—he liked to affect that homely touch—had ordered his own rocking chair."

"Lincoln"—I couldn't help emphasizing the name—"arrived late?"

"As his hand-picked generals usually had arrived on the field," was the sneer. "Yes, he was late to the theatre that night. He had to make the conqueror's entrance, I suppose. But most of the crowd was on hand to see General Grant. Grant and his wife were supposed to have gone to the play with Honest Abe that night. I fancy you know why the Grants didn't go."

I did, but I tried to let it pass. The old man had to tell. He moved to sit on the sofa beside me; leaned toward me confidentially, hand to the side of his mouth, expression furtive, in the manner of someone delivering a choice piece of gossip.

"Mrs. Grant and Mrs. Lincoln had a quarrel."

I mumbled, "Mrs. Lincoln's personality was supposed to have been difficult."

"Difficult?" the old creature cackled. "Didn't you know the woman was going crazy?"

I don't know why I should have been so irritated, but I felt as though I were listening to one of my neighbors being maligned. I retorted sharply, "It was a great pity about Mrs. Lincoln!" and that superannuated creature on the sofa at my side gave a bony chuckle.

"Maybe it wasn't her fault." He nudged me. "It's said she once chased the rail-splitter out of their house in Springfield with a butcher knife. His face was enough to drive any woman crazy. Homely? He was the homeliest man that God ever made!"

WITH that meretricious jibe, my host glanced sideways at his reflection in the mantel mirror; tapped his tall hat to a debonaire slant over his right eye. This self-conceit was nearly as offensive as his mockery; like the furnishings of his stale parlor, his elegance was decayed and wanted an airing.

I couldn't divert his repugnant preenings and sneerings, and for the next ten minutes he regaled me with a mud-slinging attack on Abraham Lincoln that was as repulsive as it was uncalled for. Referring to Lincoln as "Honest Abe," his lips would curl with scorn. Or "the rail-splitter," he would call Lincoln, with a sly, scurrilous inflection. Or, "the scarecrow from Illinois."

He probed into Lincoln's background, belittling his frontier education. He accused the country storekeeper of petty graft, the prairie lawyer of political chicanery. In some cesspool of his memory—and his memory was amazing—he had pickled all the lies, cabals, corrupted anecdotes and calumnies invented by Lincoln's enemies, and he poured them into my ear with all the glee of a vandal throwing stones through a church window and enjoying the sensation his depredations were creating.

I could feel my ears getting hot. Where history is concerned, I pride myself on being as open-minded as the next man. I was aware that Abraham Lincoln was human, as all great characters in history were human. I was aware that Lincoln had been fallible—he made mistakes—his sense of humor shocked the prudes of his day—he pulled, as all presidents must pull, political strings. But that he was a great-souled man, a heroic man, that he preserved the United States through

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our worst national disaster, rid the country of slavery and left enscribed on the hearts of men a love of justice, mercy and freedom goes without the saying. That old recluse's mud-slinging, his libels raked out of the past made me mad.

When he sneered at Lincoln's unhappy romance with Ann Rutledge as though it had been an insidious love affair, I couldn't stand it any more.

Indignation swept me to my feet. "Look here—!"

Then I had to remember I was this old bounder's guest; I'd come to his house uninvited, and he was probably a little nicked in the head and ancient enough to be my great grandfather.

He didn't seem balmy, that was the trouble. Hunched there on the sofa, chin on cane, he was like a sharp old vulture. He looked up at me with one caustic eye.

"My dear young man," he said to me acidly, "there are two ways of writing history; one is the sentimental approach that idealizes the politicians of yesterday into gods; the other is to tell the truth. Before the Yankee peasants of this neighborhood I would scarcely delineate such a hero as Lincoln"—sniff—"with honesty. But I thought you were a man of letters, an investigator after the facts. And the facts concerning Lincoln's assassination demand certain facts about Lincoln. The truth is that Lincoln was a backwoods nobody. Homely as a hedge fence. Crude and loutish and socially impossible—why, there was even some doubt about his parentage!—who didn't belong in the White House at all."

I could have punched him in the nose, dewdrop and all. For all his white hairs!

Ninety years old or not, I could feel toward that recluse none of the veneration one usually feels toward the aged; there was something sorcelous about him, something wizardish and repellent that had made me squirm from the first at his nearness. The glitter in his eye was too abnormal, and it suddenly occurred to me that he used narcotics. This vicious old fop was a drug addict? Cocaine might account for his peacock vanity, the perverted arrogance behind this attack on the greatest man of his time.

The thought of the miserable creature keeping himself alive on drugs and nursing his complex against Lincoln in this solitary storehouse of antiques made me sick. As if in defiance of my thought, the ancient vulture on the sofa pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, whisked the pearl from the point of his nose, then casually produced a pillbox from his vest and dusted some fine, white grains on the back of his hand. Grinning at my abhorrence, he snuffed it into his nostrils with a practiced sniff. At once his eyeballs were brilliant, his gestures reanimated.

"Doctor's orders," he told me with a parrot-like chuckle. "Try some? No?" He flourished the box back into his vest. "Now then," shooting out a hand to drag me down on the sofa beside him, "now then, young man, where were we? Ah, yes, you wanted to know about Ford's Theatre. Very well—the rail-splitter is late—the curtain is up—*Our American Cousin,* that detestable farce, is under way—Laura Keene hogs the spotlight on the stage—"

HE WAS started again, and I cursed myself for having asked details. I wanted to get away from that hermitage, but the old man's narcotic eyes impaled me, and I couldn't disengage his talons from my arm. Whatever it was the old buzzard had sniffed, it had wound him up to fever pitch. For fifteen minutes he chattered reminiscences, and I sat there like a mouse in the clutches of a hawk, unable to break away.

It was an astounding recital he gave me. Everything about that historic playhouse, the actors in the cast that night, the people in the audience he recalled with unbelievable clarity. Mrs. So-and-So was in a lower box. Ambassador and Madam Somebody were seated on the aisle. The leading man wore orange sideburns. Senator Somebody had a whisky nose.

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The hoopskirts, the crinolines, the flickering gas lamps, the flutter of ladies' fans—that old wizard had the knack of picturesque description. He must have known everyone in the Washington of 1865, and his falsetto-voiced memoirs rambled on like a gossip column.

But it was a malicious gossip column bitter with calumny and derision—such cynical persiflage as might have come from Oscar Wilde mixed with the morbid mental discolorations of Edgar Allen Poe.

With the aberration of the narcotic, the old man went off on a tangent about the stage in general; delivered a diatribe against the players of that long-ago time and smeared the whole profession with ugly scandal. He derided the famous Keenes as clowns unfit to face the footlights. Macready, other noted tragedians of the day he denounced as burlesque comedians. Bouccicault, Rehan, Bernhardt, Joseph Jefferson, the theatrical great of the 80's and 90's fared no better on his scalding tongue. Leaping up from the sofa to brandish his cane, he concluded with a venomous onslaught on Edwin Booth.

"*Edwin* Booth!" He sneered at the memory. "*That* harlequin! An actor? My dear young man, poor Shakespeare must have turned over in his grave. The fellow delivered his lines as if his mouth were full of soap. A marionette, truly! That he should have been considered our leading tragedian is evidence to the sorry state in which our theatre at that time had fallen."

I couldn't understand what this digression on the theatre was leading up to. I didn't want to understand. I wanted to get out in the air, out of that stale reliquary. But that nonagenarian drug addict wouldn't let me go home to take a bath. His fingers were hooks on my arm; he leaned over me, breathing like a gaspipe in my face.

"I'm only trying to show you what an insipid play they were showing in Ford's Theatre that night." He leered down. "The entire theatrical profession had sunk to farce. The cast that night would have been jeered off a Mississippi showboat. But there was *one* actor in the house that night, by dear young man. One truly great tragedian. One Shakespearean player—and perhaps the only one of his time—worthy of the name of thespian! Can you guess who that one was, my dear young man?"

I couldn't. His skull-sunk eyes were blazing into mine, and with that pearl-tipped nose of his thrust into my face, I couldn't even think. He began to tell me, winding himself up with a breath.

"NEVER was there a greater tragedian, my dear young sir. Never a man more accomplished on the stage. Handsome, aristocratic, possessed of genius, he had already raised histrionics to an artistry unmatched by his jealous competitors.

"If history has maligned him, it is only because his star was too bright for the myopic eyes of common men. If the critics of his day belittled him, it is only because true genius is never recognized by a man's contemporaries. Poor, ill-fortuned thespian—from the first he was destined to mischance.

"His older brother could pander for the favour of the critics, but the artist of whom I speak would never resort to pandering. Determined to win plaudits on merit, he was too proud to beg for public acclaim.

"Courageously he played above the understanding of the herd, and heroically he faced his destiny when the South he loved was ravished by the Northern invader. Like a knight of old he took up the sword, became a dashing blade, a tower of vengeance against the enemy, and at the last the star in a mighty drama of retribution. I give you"—he caught up an empty goblet from a table; lifted it to deliver the fantastic toast—"I give you John Wilkes Booth!"

I didn't want John Wilkes Booth. I would have given a thousand dollars never to have heard of him. I saw now what the old man's vicious slurs on all those

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other stage stars had been leading up to. And I saw a possibility of something else.

Somewhere in the beginning of that flamboyant, oratorical eulogy, behind the old man's flower-garnished phrases and encomiums, I had my first cancerous suspicion. I kicked it out of my mind as if it were a scorpion. This old dope fiend in his antique frock coat and stovepipe hat was crazy. Off the handle with his history, the way some people went haywire about Napoleon.

But as he spoke of Booth his voice went sweet as caramel. For twenty minutes he carried on the eulogy, describing the assassin as a poet and a gentleman, a man whose Apollo-like handsomeness was the envy of the theatrical world, whose daring Civil War exploits were unmatched by any soldier North or South.

It was long past my dinner hour, but I couldn't have eaten a morsel anyway. Stifling to begin with, that soggy room began to swim on my vision, and the suspicion that had started in my mind sank down to my stomach like a millstone. The old man's ornate language. His bombastic vanity. His intimate knowledge of the stage. His familiarity with Ford's Theatre. But most of all, his incredible whitewashing of John Wilkes Booth, in contrast to his scurrile mud-slinging at Abraham Lincoln.

Impossible as it was, the thing that had occurred to me robbed me of my appetite; I felt a cold thrall come over me, as though I had entered the lair of an adder.

The old man's eyes held me like the stare of a snake. He was describing Lincoln's arrival at the theatre, and his bloodless lips, sneering at the martyred President, dropped verbal vipers and toads.

"As the lanky, gangling fellow shambled into the box, the orchestra played *Hail To The Chief*. I wish you could have seen him, my dear young sir.

"He looked about as much like a chief as a scarecrow out of a cornfield. Of course there was a lot of cheering and flag-waving, the usual mob demonstration. But as I said, the crowd expected General Grant, and I fancy they were disappointed. The rail-splitter bowed awkwardly and sat down in his rocking chair, his wife beside him, some doltish-looking officer with a girl in the next chairs.

"I recall Honest Abe putting his head close to this army escort's, then giving a loud guffaw. Doubtless laughing at one of his stupid jokes. You can't picture an uglier human than this loutish backwoods President wearing that shabby shawl on his shoulders, in want of a haircut, and that unfashionable beard. He had a thick underlip, you know, and a wart on his face—"

It was abominable. Monstrous! In that nightmarish room I seemed to be sitting in a well of ice, my muscles slowly freezing, while that vitriol-tongued old recluse, in the light of the dying fireplace-embers was a sorcerer binding me in a spell, a dreadful Mr. Hategood paralyzing my spirit with words of poison.

"But now, my dear young man," holding up a skeleton's finger, "the hours of this White House jackanapes are numbered! The hero-worshipers have described his face as sad. I, who saw it, would have called it haggard. And no wonder, with the ruined, bleeding South on his conscience. There are those who like to describe his personality as mournful. Why not, when because of his crazy abolitionist policy a million men were dead. I had a good look at his face as he entered the box that night, my young friend. I had a very good look at the face of this country lawyer, this so-called savior of the Union, this champion of abolition. All I can say is that it did, indeed, look like the face of a man who would publicly shake hands with a nigger!"

The speaker paused to sniff another dose of cocaine. I tried to edge away from him on the sofa. Suspicion growing in my mind jelled the sweat-beads on my forehead.

I broke from paralysis to whisper, "Wah-where were you—in the theatre

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that night—when Lincoln took his seat in the box?"

"I? I was watching from the wings."

"From the wings?" I gasped. "What were you doing on the stage?"

He flourished the pillbox back into his vest, adjusted his stovepipe hat, and stuck an oratorical posture. "I was an actor."

IV

THE last light of evening was dimming at the shutters, and the corners of the room were growing dark. I was glad my face was in shadow; I had lost control of my features. But the old man wasn't watching, anyway. Stepping to a mildewed cabinet near the fireplace, he wrenched at a drawer; returned with a handful of photographs—the posed, theatrical photographs of the Civil War era.

"These are the only ones I ever kept. Myself in the part of Richard the Third. If you're interested—"

The pictures were a blur—the usual matinee idol thing in Shakespearean costume—an actor in cape, crown and false beard posturing in front of scenery. *Richard III!* I was trying to remember something about *Richard III!* But my mind was a stunned blank as I stared from the faded photographs to the creature who had played the role.

"So you once played Richard—?" my voice stuck.

"Oh, I played many important leads." He gestured pompously. "Charlotte Cushman was opposite me. She was very good in love scenes."

A lascivious snicker leaked from a corner of his mouth. He knuckled his lips, enjoying this memory; then he made a flourish with his cane. "But you are anxious to hear of the assassination. I am coming to that, my young friend, the hour is approaching.

"Picture, if you can, the rail-splitter in his presidential box like a blackbird sitting in a gilded nest. He does not know that the door to the passage behind his box has been left unguarded. He does not know that a plank has been secreted in the passage, a plank that may be used to bar the passage door. He does not know that that afternoon a visitor to the theatre drilled a hole through the door to the presidential box—a peephole which would enable a man to peek into the box at this tyrant who had demolished his beloved South. No, the rail-splitter does not know that the moment of retribution is approaching."

The old wizard paused dramatically, and his black eyes glittered. "The play is going on. It was the second scene of the third act. I can see it in my mind's eye now. Enter,"—he saluted with the cane—"John Wilkes Booth!"

"Where—" my voice seemed to be somewhere down near my liver, "whawhere did Booth enter from?"

"Ha! He crossed behind the seats of the dress circle, and sauntered calmly to the passage behind the rail-splitter's box. Think of the courage of the man, my dear young friend. Consider the odds against the accomplishment of his historic task. In a crowded theatre! Soldiers everywhere! But alone, single-handed, in the very heart of the enemy's capitol, this champion of a Cause already lost walks coolly to the box of the Conqueror, and prepares to wield an avenger's wrath against tyranny! But would you like to see how Booth achieved his destiny, young man? Would you like me to demonstrate the greatest act in all history—?"

I didn't want to see any such thing, but before I could protest it, the demoniac old drug fiend darted past me on his pipestem legs, set to pushing and clawing through his antique furniture, shoving chairs, tables and writing desks this way and that to clear a space before the fireplace. Wheezing from the exertion, he dragged an empty bookcase across the carpet, and ranged it sideways to represent a wall. An umbrella stand indicated a door. The hearth represented the stage, and a plush-bottomed rocker pushed to the center of the carpet was President Lincoln's chair.

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"The box was like that. So! The footstools over there—that is the dress circle. You, my dear young sir, are the audience."

I WAS the audience, all right. Following his wizardish flittings and dodgings with mesmerized eyes. Absorbed in this charade, he was busy as a spider spinning a web. His hat came down over one eye, and his breath whistled through his teeth as he capered around the sofa, shoving furniture. I don't know what evil genius possessed him, but somehow or other he created Ford's Theatre there in that room of firelight and shadow, and as a final touch of malevolence—with an artistry nothing short of devilish—he teetered up with a hatrack in his arms, and propped it at a rakish slant in the rocking chair, a terrible dummy of Lincoln.

"There's the theatre-scene for you! That's how it was!" In his excitement he unjointed a knee; buckled down on the sofa beside me, cursing. Something was wrong with his leg. A thin snail-track of slime glistened from the corner of his mouth as he struggled to rise. His face, in pain, was bestial.

"Now for Booth!" On his feet once more, snarling. "Now for John Wilkes Booth!"

Scuttling to a corner, he stooped over an old wooden chest that was covered by a piece of carpet. The lid-hinges screeched as if the box were alive; then he was pawing into the battered chest like a pirate after loot.

I couldn't quite see what he was up to—his back was toward me—darkness at the shutter-cracks had blackened into night—the only light in the room was the red-tinged glow of dying hearth coals. But after considerable rummaging, the creature brought out what seemed to be a clutter of little medicine bottles and salve jars.

Banging the lid, he lined up the bottles before him, set up an old-fashioned shaving mirror, then went through a weird legerdemain, combing the hair back from his ears, daubing at his cheeks and nose, rattling the little jars and rubbing grease into his face, for all the world like a vain old woman applying a mess of cosmetics.

Done, he snatched a cloak from a wall-hook; threw it around his shoulders. He turned. I think my heart stopped as dead as all those clocks in that room. That ancient actor had been making up, all right. Only it wasn't any ordinary make-up he had put on. That transformation rivaled anything I had ever seen on the stage, Lon Chaney and the Barrymores included.

Two strokes of the comb and a powder of charcoal-dust, and the old man's hair had turned black. A zip of the pencil had established beetling eyebrows. He must have used putty to flesh out his cheeks; rouge and lipstick had achieved a remarkable restoration, wiping out the ravages of age and drugs; and somehow he had rejuvenated the white wisps on his upper lip into a bold, black handle-bar moustache—the final touch to an astounding portrait.

"Ah ha!" Hand clapped to bosom, he faced me in melodramatic pose.

I stared until my hair-roots ached. That make-up was marvelous. It was too marvelous! When the old man pulled his cape about him, went into a stage-villain's stoop, and began prowling toward the hearth on exaggerated tiptoe, I could have yelled. I forgot I was in a shack in the woods somewhere up near the Canadian border. I forgot what time it was, what year it was.

That old recluse was more than a wonderful artist in grease-paint; he was a wonderful character impersonator, a master of pantomime. As he had created Ford's Theatre out of firelight and shadow and some shabby pieces of furniture—by the same wizardry with which he had turned his skull-face into a living portrait—now his gestures turned back Time; in that room where the clocks had stopped, it was 1865.

The awful surrealism of that hatrack in the rocking chair! That creeping portrait, stealing forward like a shadow out

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of the past! He paused to open an imaginary door, and it was as if I were witnessing the event itself.

Now he was in the passage behind Lincoln's box, jamming the passage-door against pursuit with the waiting plank. Stealthily he approached the door behind Lincoln's chair. Bending on one knee, he put an eye to the peep-hole, crouched like a tiger measuring the spring.

"Ha!"

Breath came through his teeth in an exultant hiss as he plunged his hand into bosom and yanked out an old-fashioned derringer. That was no make-believe derringer, either. My blood went cold when I saw that rusty antique. It was the sort of rare weapon prized by curio-collectors, and it gave that pantomime an illusion of actuality that made me want to cry out a warning to the man beyond the imaginary door.

I couldn't breathe. On the sofa I was the stick of wood; the lank piece of furniture in the rocking chair was flesh and blood. The hatred manufactured on that portrait-face at the peep hole had atrophied my tongue. Now he was entering the box. The doorknob under his fingers made no sound.

Lincoln, intent on the play, did not turn. Why didn't someone feel the draught, look around? Major Rathbone—! Miss Harris—! *Look out!*

Bang!

THAT assassin fired as he sprang, and I know I yelled. He fired from a crouch behind the unsuspecting figure in the rocking chair, and the explosion might have been a thunderclap over the house, timed for that moment, or it might have been in my mind.

But my hearing was stunned, and I could smell the powder-smoke, it was so real. I suppose he kicked the rocker to make the dummy sprawl lower in the chair. It was pantomime when he dodged backward, went ducking and weaving across the carpet in a shadow-fight with an invisible assailant. Pantomime when he flung down the gun to snatch out a dagger and slash Lincoln's defender in the arm. But I could see Abraham Lincoln slumped there immobile, chin on breast, dying; I could see Major Rathbone beating at this black-cloaked assassin; Mary Lincoln crying out, fainting; the major's fiancée leaning from the box to scream, "The President has been shot! The President has been shot!"

With a savage blow the murderer knocked her aside.

Eyes blazing, he flung one booted leg over the flag-draped cowling of the box; paused to look back, one glance of tigerish hatred, at his dying victim. Then, in his wild leap down to the stage, he hooked his spurs in the Stars and Stripes. Bunting tore as he sprawled. He was on his feet immediately, running across the stage in an excruciating crouch, face twisted in desperation, oaths of agony spitting through his teeth.

At the wings, he halted. Stared up at the box where the worn, gaunt figure of Abraham Lincoln sat composed as though fallen asleep. Across the stage from the killer the cast of *Our American Cousin* stood transfixed.

In the back of the theatre, in the balcony and gallery, the audience sat bewildered, believing the leap from the President's box a part of the show. Only in the dress circle pandemonium was breaking loose, men in swallow-tails and uniformed army officers shouting to their feet, women beginning to point and faint and scream. The assassin stilled them with one piercing, brazen-tongued cry. Delivered in the Shakespearean manner. Dagger uplifted. Head thrown back and one foot forward in theatrical bombast.

"Sic semper tyrannis!"

I don't know how that bestial old drug addict did it, dodging around chairs, jumping over footstools, pantomiming on that fire-lit hearth. But I saw it all. The actors huddled back in consternation; uproar growing in the orchestra stalls; panic sweeping the house.

Even the bravado, the egotistical ar-

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rogance of the assassin that surmounted the pain of a broken leg and burst from him in that last villainous cry, an attempt at Shakespearean dramaturgy that achieved, on the lips of a matinee ham, only mountebank melodramatics.

Shrilling out that infamous cry, the old man in his devilish costume scuttled back into shadow.

The act was over. Murder was done. I have an idea the star performer expected applause, but he didn't get it. Not from me. I was too carried away by the convincing excellence of the performance. The audience which had witnessed the actuality in Ford's Theatre could have been no more horrified, no more stunned.

I sat there on that rotted sofa like a bump on a log.

John Wilkes Booth had murdered Lincoln at a few minutes after ten, and I suddenly realized that all those clocks in that room were reading 10:15. There was something diabolical and unearthly in that squalid hermitage. The old mummer's one-man show was like a nightmare in which delirium and reality were blended to a point where I was unable to separate them in my consciousness. The act was over, but the play seemed to be going on. I thought I could hear the mounting pandemonium, the voices of many people in hue and cry, as if the long-ago echoes from the past were reaching into the room where I sat. The echoes seemed to louden. I could have sworn I heard the tattoo of horse-hoofs in night, the pound of running feet, Lincoln's name and the cry of murder down the wind.

Thunder boomed abruptly in the night outside, and the window-shutters rattled, and a damp September gust moaned down the fireplace chimney. It was my imagination, I knew; yet the illusion of nearing outcry persisted. I saw the old recluse in his marvelous make-up lift his head and give a start, even as the assassin he portrayed must have harkened to the clamor of nearing pursuit. I saw him start and stare and move involuntarily backward as if he had heard voices too.

Then I saw something else; something that capped the climax to that whole hallucinatory seance! To put on that shadow-show performance the old man had laid aside his cane; now as he backed away from the firelight his bad leg gave out—perhaps he caught his heel on the hem of his tragedian's cape—at any rate, he lost his balance, tottered, and began to stagger and flounder backward like a comedian with a trick knee. A footstool tripped him, and he was down outsprawled. It wasn't funny, that spill. It brought me to my feet, staring at something that turned the sweatbeads on my forehead into flakes of snow.

That old wooden chest in the corner! That battered trunk in which the recluse had delved for his marvelous impersonation! In falling, the old man had flung out a hand, grabbed the strip of carpet covering the lid, and pulled the covering askew.

An edge of firelight reached into the corner, and there was just enough eerie redness to see it by. Letters painted on the side of the trunk, revealed where the carpet-cover had been snatched away. The carpeting slanted down across the corner of the chest to cut off the name. But I could see enough. More than enough!

The letters revealed spelled, *BOO—!*

V

THAT was how I felt about it. An exact expression of my state of mind. The night was in on the conspiracy, and as those goblin letters jumped at me out of the corner and went, "Boo—!" there was a simultaneous thunder-crack that almost brought down the roof; white lightning blazed through the window shutters, flooding the room with an instant of dazzling incandescence; in that flash the dreadful occupant of the hermitage, upright and cursing, stood exposed.

The *Boo* and the lightning flash revealed all the answers—to the old man's horrible conceit—his arrogance preserved

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into tarnished decay—his recluse, self-exiled existence—his hatred of the martyred president.

I could see it all in that blinding flash—the answer to his knowledge of theatre lore—his acquaintance with the details of Lincoln's assassination—his astounding portraiture in grease-paint—his amazing impersonation! Staring at that awful figure, that shadow from the past in its tragedian's cloak and tall black hat, I couldn't move for paralysis. But my mind raced back to the notes and research papers I'd left on my desk at the village inn, and suspicion congealed into terrible certainty.

"My God!" I heard my voice crying out like the windy hooting of nightmare. "Then the capture *was* a fake! You—*did* get away—!"

He didn't hear me. He'd grabbed his stick to bolster his trick leg; hand cupped to ear, he was listening toward the door.

"The barn!" I panted, mentally racing through my notes. "How did—how did you get out?"

He wasn't listening to me. He was moving along the wall in a creepy stoop; moving towards a shuttered front window. He seemed to hear something, and stopped in mid room. He switched his black eyes from side to side.

I wanted to yell at that; the look on that portrait-painted face was appalling. But that moment was too big for any utterance of mine. The yell that came to match the expression on that face didn't come from me. It burst into the room like a final bombshell, and it came from the night outside.

"Open up in there! Open the door—!"

IT CAME from the night outside, and yet it didn't come from the night outside. It was hoarse and empty-lunged, breathless, as if it had come all the way from 1865. Simultaneously there was a furious pounding for admittance—although it might have been the wind—and the creature in midroom caught himself by the throat and glared at the door as though he were looking through it at a hangman's noose.

"They've come for me!" His tongue flickered in and out like a snake's. "They've come for me at last—!"

"Let us in!" the cry was hoarser and more breathless. "Open the door, you devil, or we'll break it down!"

I knew I must be imagining this. All of it. It was mental suggestion, ventriloquism, the old drug fiend had me mesmerized.

He had me mesmerized, and he was making me believe that the thunder-echoes were fists on the door and the autumnal wind was a cry from the night. Yet the fear that was green on his skull-face under the grease-paint was more than hallucinary. No illusion about the fright in his throat, screeching, "Who's there? Who's there outside? What do you want?" Ventriloquism couldn't account for the uproar that broke loose around the hermitage, the shouts, catcalls, whoops, oaths, the whinney of horses, babble of men.

"We want you, you dirty rapscallion!"—"Come outa there, you polecat, an' give yourself up!"—"We got you surrounded!"—"Ain't a chance of gettin' away this time?" It was the wind, of course.

The wind whooping through the trees of the surrounding forest, howling past the window shutters, crying down the fireplace chimney. Leaves blowing across the porch made a sound of scuffling boots, and the scurry as of men around the house was the rustling of dry brush and weeds.

But the old man screeched, "Go away from here, or I'll kill the lot of you!" and the babble outside became a many-tongued howl of fury; a voice on the porch squalled, "What are we waitin' for, Joe? Give it the axe!" I thought I heard that, and I thought I heard a shrill whoop, "Bust her in, boys!" Then, as crashing shook the hermitage, I thought I was going mad.

The door rattled, bulged and shivered, and the wind in the chimney shrieked. The old drug fiend's eyeballs were popping, too.

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He was staring at the door like a magician whose wizardry had gotten away from him, an illusionist who'd let his magic get out of control.

I saw his hand shake down from his throat and go fumbling into his bosom after the gun. I saw him steady his palsied aim, and I saw him fire. The derringer banged, no doubt about it. A sharp report, and a bullet-hole in the quaking door-panel. Answered by a wail of wind? Or a human cry? "Keep back, he's got a gun—!"

"And I'll slay the first dog who dares to cross this threshold!" the old man man screeched. "Break the door in, now, if you dare—!"

His voice rose, brazen as a fishhorn, but the screech was drowned by a detonation of thunder. The thunder wasn't imaginary, but the storm of shouting that echoed through the tumult convinced me I had lost my mind.

"Where's that torch? Who's got that torch?"—"That's the idea; we'll burn th' rascal out!"—"She'll go like tinder, boys!"—"Hurry up with that kerosene can!"

Fire? Or was the torchlight that flickered past the shutter-cracks no more than lightning. A smell of kerosene? A sudden ominous crackling on the porch? An acrid tang invading the room's dankness with a coughy pungence? Or was that crackling from a gust of dry-blown sticks, the smell of smoke from the dying fireplace embers? Thunder boomed around the house, and the smokiness increased. It might have been my imagination, and it might not. And I started to the door to find out, but I didn't get there.

With a howl that would have curdled a werewolf, the old man was at me, ravening. I couldn't stop the blow. He came at me on the oblique, and he hit me first with his eyes and then with the derringer. There was nothing mesmeric about that crack on the temple—the goose-egg stayed with me for a week!—I dropped to the carpet as though pole-axed. But there was something mesmeric about that glare from those narcotic eyes. I lay on the floor, and I couldn't seem to get up, and although I was not unconscious I was certain I was having a dream.

IN this dream the storm in the night outside grew louder; the shouting grew louder; the fire-crackle grew louder, and the room filled with smoke; and the old man whirled in his cape and raced to that chest labeled *Boo* in the corner.

I saw him throw back the lid and go down on one knee. Working like fury, he snatched out a litter of hats, coats, moth-eaten garments, such fantastic articles of apparel as might have been worn by the Old Scratch, himself. His rattlesnake eyes never left me, then, and he did it without the aid of mirrors.

Just how he did it I could not have said, because of the fog in my head and the fog in the room. But when he came out of that corner this time, he was a farmer in a shabby slouch hat and a Scotch-plaid ulster. His eyes were squinty behind silver-rimmed spectacles, and he wore a bushy black beard.

"Smoke me out, will they? Burn me like a nigger in a barn? The devils! The curst Yankee blackguard devils—!"

Spitting, coughing, he made for the door, and he might have gotten away with it, at that. Might have opened the door and dashed out in the flame-light and smoke and darkness, and tricked them into letting him by in that disguise. He was a wonderful actor, and I doubt if those men out there (if there were men out there!) would have recognized him. Would he have told them he was caught in their trap by accident—that I was the man they wanted? Would an excited mob have riddled me? More likely he would have shot me, himself; left me there to be burned to an unidentifiable cinder. If history, attempting to repeat itself, had not taken a sudden turn.

Whoosh! It rained. There was an earthquaking thunderclap, and the cloudburst, pent up since afternoon, broke. Water fell

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with the roar of Niagara coming down. Outside and in, the hermitage was engulfed.

I will never know quite what happened after that—how much was truth, how much was fancy.

That rainstorm leaked through the ceiling, I know, and poured down the chimney to flood the fireplace. The room was blackened out; if there was a bonfire on the porch it was extinguished. Above the cloudburst's roar I seemed to hear the cries of baffled men, and someone shouting an order to charge. Then the door burst inward with an explosion of kindling, and I seemd to see the doorway ajam with men and lights and guns, all blurred in a smudge of smoke and swirling rain.

History repeating itself? Figment of a semi-conscious mind? Mirage or actuality, whatever it was that rain-and-smoke scene was straight out of Currier & Ives. Dark figures etched against a background of swoopy night. Grim-jawed faces under purposeful, downpulled hatbrims. Muddy boots. Shotguns. Lanterns. Coiled ropes. That hue and cry which had seemed to echo out of the past had caught up with the present. I could have sworn those men in the doorway were Union veterans.

The shotguns glinting in shadow became army Springfields, the looming figure in the foreground a sergeant of Federal cavalry. He brandished a long-barreled Civil War pistol, and belted to his waist was a shining cavalry saber. Somewhere I had seen that granite-hewn Yankee face before, but whether in a a picture or somewhere in my past, I couldn't have told.

The big man stepped across the threshold, and he brought the rain in with him.

Afterward I couldn't remember getting to my feet, but I was standing up, clutching the sofa for support, when the big man with the cavalry pistol and saber entered the room.

"Where is he?" The big man's stare slashed at me and at the brown-whiskered creature across the floor, and his voice might have been made out of thunder and wind, but it sounded real. "Where's the dirty varmint who's hiding here?"

It came to me that I was part of the scene, too, although I couldn't imagine who, unless it was the idiot, David Herold.

I heard myself moan, "There he is!" and I was pointing. It didn't sound like my voice, scaling up to a piccolo whistle. "That's him! That's him! My God, that must be how he made his escape the first time! He's put on a farmer's costume. He's wearing a false beard. He—!"

I think the old man fired. He had out his derringer, but I don't know. Thunder was cannoning in the night outside; lightning blazed at the windows; mob roar or storm roar swept into the room, and everything on my vision went merry-go-round. Beard torn askew, the old man was flailing about him at a maelstrom of shadows; ghostly figures sprang and collided in the dimness; tables went over, pictures came down, chairs smashed.

Groggy, I reeled and clutched my aching temple, dazed in a hurlyburly of muffled yells, oaths, crashing glass, thump of blows.

I saw that old drug fiend hurling bottles and crockery, and something hit me on the ear, plunging me acropper into a china cupboard. Under an avalanche of cups, saucers and dishpans, I went down. Everything went out of focus, and then everything came back into focus, like a dream that had started to fade and then revived.

AROUND me the room, blurred with fog and mist, was a scene of wild disorder. Furniture overturned. Carpet uprooted. Bibelots and bric-a-brac strewn across the floor. Rain swirled through the door, and lightning blazed through the window shutters, and in the midst of the wreckage, encircled by misty figures with ghostly lanterns, and shotguns, the inhabitant of that hermitage stood at bay.

His ulster had been torn off, his false beard and spectacles were gone, and he

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must have been sorry he had neglected to remove the make-up on his face, yet, queerly enough, he didn't look sorry. The eyes under the brim of the disheveled slouch hat were like balls of black fire. Under the swoop of painted moustachios the mouth was a sneer. Once more he seemed tall and vain and arrogant, confronting his captors with all the lordly and tarnished hauteur of an impoverished duke defying the righteous vengeance of serfs. Even the big Yankee's cavalry pistol aimed straight at the drop on that icicle nose could not abash that creature's astoundingly recovered pomp.

"Rogues! Blackguards!" Turning and wheeling on the men around him, the creature began to spit invective. "What is the meaning of this high-handed escapade? I'll have the law on you!"

The big Yankee with the granite face snarled, "Shut up, an' come along. We ain't going to wait for the law. Wasn't for th' traitors in th' government, you wouldn't got away in th' first place."

The old man screamed, "Got away? From what? From whom? Every scoundrel of you will suffer for this trespassing, never forget it!"

"Nobody's forgetting anything!" the big man thundered. "Not at least us Yankees! Th' Union's still th' Union, and nobody ever will forget th' murder of Abraham Lincoln!"

"Lincoln? The murder of Lincoln—?"

"We know why you came here to hide, an' we know all about it. You know all about it, too. All about how some traitors in Washington was hand in glove to help you with the get-away. All about th' assassination!"

A figure at the back shouted, "Hundred thousand dollars reward for you, too. We're goin' to write our claim to Washington!"

"You—" the old man choked on the scream, "you accuse *me* of Lincoln's assassination? *Me!*" Fury scribbled the portrait on his face; became a twist of incredulous astonishment. "Have you Yankee clapperclaws gone mad? In the name of heaven, what have you got against *me?*"

The big man with the cavalry pistol thundered an oath. "Don't try to lie out of it, you mangey hound, we got your description in a copy of th' handbill. Don't you admit that you're an actor?"

"Actor?" shrill-tongued. "Certainly I'm an actor!"

"Wasn't you at Ford's Theatre in Washington th' night President Lincoln was shot?"

"Have I ever said I wasn't?"

"Isn't that your name?" It was my own voice wailing. Wailing into this fog-misted, time-blurred scene that was like the mixed-up jabberwocky of nightmare. "Isn't that your name on that wooden chest in the corner?"

"Chest?" he glared at me electric-eyed. "That's a wardrobe trunk, you fool! A costume trunk I used to use in the theatre!" His voice splintered to high soprano above the whoop and boom of the storm. "What in all damnation has come over you confounded ruffians? Who in God's name do you think I am?"

Then my voice splintered—cracked to pieces in disbelief at the astoundment scribbled on that old scoundrel's face. "Are you trying to tell us you're *not* John Wilkes Booth—?"

AND then that vulturous old mime began to laugh. A cackle at first. A henhouse cackle that started in his throat as one hen, and grew to the raucous cacaphony of hysteria in a barnyard. He flapped his skinny arms like wings. Doubled over his desiccated stomach and scratched the floor with his feet. There in the dimness and lanternshine of that stale and ruined room, in the very teeth of his hangmen, that dried-up old drug fiend shook with the convulsions of a diabolic mirth that drove his misty accusers step by step away from him. Widened their shadowy circle about him. Sent them backing toward the door, their shadow-faces puzzled, uneasy, robbed of purpose by that Hudibrastic, chicken-tongued hilarity.

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"Aaaaaah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yaaaaah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" It froze the watery smoke-smudge in the room. It congealed the shadow-figures in a huddle at the door. Even the thundering outside came to a stop. "Oh, my! Oh, me-hee-heeee! And I'd thought they'd come after me to arrest me for using cocain! Yaah—"

Abruptly as it had begun, the laughter choked off. White-lipped, gargling, the old man straightened upright like an epileptic recovering from a fit. As his features squirmed into place, the scorn on that paint-smeared countenance was a masterpiece. Green-black, the narcotic eyes blazed. Head thrown back with a Shakesperean chin-lift, arms folded, bosom outthrust, the old man faced his accusers like a statue of all the matinee idols of history moulded into one.

"Dolts! Curst Yankee clods!"

I will never forget how he stood there in the unreality of the lantern-gleams, confounding those spectral cavalrymen with a performance surpassing anything ever staged in any theatre. His acid words are engraved on my memory.

"Of course I'm an actor! Of course I was in Ford's Theatre that night—as an understudy in the cast of *Our American Cousin!* The name on that costume trunk naturally designates my wardrobe! Booth? Of course I'm John Wilkes Booth!" One foot forward, chest pouting, left hand on hip, he gave a twirl to the tips of his villainous moustache, striking a perfect portrait. "Why, I've been recognized as Booth all over Europe and America! I was famous in the role before any of you fools were born! I'm the greatest John Wilkes Booth since Joseph Jefferson—!"

Famous in the role before any of us were born! The greatest John Wilkes Booth since Joseph Jefferson! I saw it.

One after another, the spectral members of that lynching party got it, too. Slowly, quietly, the shadow-figures thefted back out of the doorway. On the porch, in the rain-swirl and wind-whoop, the ghostly possé melted. Maybe someone gave an order, and maybe someone didn't. But all at once the guns and lanterns and men with downpulled hatbrims were gone; the broken doorway was empty; and off in the night, through the splash-bang of the storm, I heard—or thought I heard—the clatter of fading hoofbeats, the screech of buggy wheels.

It was time for me to go, and I went. Out of the door like a gunshot, and across the ink-swept hollow without stopping to look back. Somewhere up the path I fell headlong in the mud, and when I came up in a blaze of lightning I was clutching in my fingers a muddy handbill—facsimile of a historic handbill offering one hundred thousand dollars for the capture of John Wilkes Booth. Had it fluttered from my own pocket (I had had among my notes such a copy) or had it been dropped by one of the ghostly army which had evaporated there? I couldn't remember if I had been carrying it, and I still can't remember. Nor can I recall how, in the dark and panic, I found my car.

But somehow I reached the road, and the car was there, and as I backed and turned on the wagon-path, the headlights wheeled through the rain-gusts and picked out the hermitage at the bottom of the hollow. The recluse was framed in his doorway. He was spilling white grains from a pillbox onto the back of his hand, but he lifted his head to watch my departure. In the glare of the carlights his eyeballs blazed like a cat's, his face was a sneering skull, and he gestured melodramatic fingers to twirl his stage-villain's moustache—I will never forget the laugh he gave me, then!—to the last the old actor playing out his role.

Lightning cracked across the sky to flood the heavens with hell-light, and I fled down the storming road chased by bolts of electricity and thunderclaps.

I WAS almost back in the village before I knew what had happened, and then I wasn't too sure. Either I had had a brainstorm—my head full of notes and documents and too much study—and that narcotic-eyed old actor had conjured up a

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seance of hallucinations. Or those apparitional Yankees had actually been there—neither ghosts conceived by the old man's pantomime, nor specters from the past, but flesh and blood Yankees, farmers and villagers, a mob of angry countrymen aroused by a sudden suspicion that the recluse actor was Lincoln's assassin.

Suppose that innkeeper, who had told me about the old man, had gone up to my room and glanced through my notes? I could imagine his surprise at some of those records, his thoughts going to the old actor in the hermitage, his Yankee shrewdness putting two and two together.

Wasn't that hermit always gabbing about Lincoln's assassination? Actor, wasn't he? What a story for the boys in the barroom! Men with their heads together. Rumor mounting to certainty. Tempers rising in indignation. Look at those notes on that writer fella's desk! Lincoln's killer might've got away! That actor up in th' woods must be close to a hundred! If Booth was still alive—! Sure, he's Booth—! "Get your shotguns, boys—!"

Of course those Yankees had come from the village! Where else could they have come from, and how else could such a lynch party have been gathered?

But my calculations got a shock when, returned to the cozy barroom of Four Corners Inn, I found the tables deserted and the hotel keeper smoking his pipe.

"Bad night out," he gave me over the rim of a rural newspaper. Yawning, "See the Old Man?"

I stared at him. His granite-hewn face was somehow familiar, but his eyes were sleepy and he yawned.

"Well, 'smidnight," he scratched the small of his back, hitched his suspenders. "Reckon I'll be gettin' up to bed. Ain't much stirrin' after dark in these parts; nothin' to keep us out late like you city fellers. Want anything, mister, you just ring the bell. G'night."

But he was in his socks, going up the stairs, and he moved pretty quietly for a big man; and I glimpsed his boots under the bar room stove, and they were muddy. I wanted something, all right, but I didn't ring the bell. I was staring at something over the bar. There were a deer head and a moose head and a pair of antlers on the wall behind the bar, and under the antlers, crossed in symbolic fashion, hung a long-barreled Civil War pistol and a shining cavalry saber.

I got to my room and began a hasty check-up through my notes. Which, incidentally, were neatly ranged on my desk with an orderliness foreign to my nature.

I was looking for a scar, and shortly after one o'clock—to my undying consternation!—I found it. In a reference (I knew there was something about that play) concerning *Richard III*. As Richard in the famous Shakesperean tragedy, John Wilkes Booth had once been accidentally slashed above the right eye in a dueling scene. Sensitive about the disfigurement, he always combed his hair to cover it.

Throwing down my reference papers, I rushed for the telephone. My friend Clayborne, the New York dramatic critic, is an authority on theatre history, often called in to settle some biographic dispute. But I can imagine his astonishment at my long-distance call to ask him about Joseph Jefferson. He told me afterward that I gabbled in the phone like a crazy man, was too impolite to thank him for the information.

I don't suppose I felt in a thankful mood. I don't know what mood I was in as I dashed out of that village inn, sprinted for the barn where my car was stabled, and raced off into night. The thunderstorm had passed, and the landscape was moon-washed, the valley black and silver under a sky still turbulent with scudding mysteries of cloud. Everything whispered and dripped. Up Blackberry Hill from Peterson's Mill the road had dissolved into a ribbon of paste, but I got my car up the valley-side in nothing flat. Then the sight that met my eyes at the old Iron Foundry on the hilltop stalled my wheels.

The dark old ruin had been struck by

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lightning, and one wall was demolished. Sometime after my retreat from the hermitage in the woods it must have happened, for the road-bend into the trees was blocked by the collapsed wall, and I had to climb out to clear a path.

Then I saw the tracks. Someone, running out of the woods, had entered the foundry—in the mud the prints were clear—and the tracks went in, but did not come out. Sensing a disaster, I got my flashlight out of the car and picked my way into the shadowy ruin. These was a cavernous archway obstructed by broken masonry and iron scrap; I made out the weed-grown silhouette of the abandoned smelter furnace; and then in a sort of inner courtyard I came on a jagged mass of iron framework that looked in the dimness like a collapsed cantilever bridge.

It took me a minute to see this rusty pile was a fallen crane, and hanging in the crane where the workmen of long-ago had left it, there had been a cannon barrel—the unfinished barrel of a monster siege piece of Civil War design.

Lightning had struck the crane like a bombshell, and the blast had brought the cannon down out of its chains, crashing. Under the mound of twisted iron it lay across the ground like a giant conduit pipe, split from muzzle to breech. The scene might have been a photograph of Fort Sumter after bombardment. The ray of my exploring flashlight traveled to the gun-breech; stopped. Not the least fantastic in this night of fantasy—that the man who was dead, there, had been killed by a cannon dated 1865.

UNDER that thunderbolted siege-barrel the man had been crushed like a fly. He must have fled his hermitage shortly after my departure; frightened into deserting the place by the visit from the villagers. He had carried his costume trunk with him, and the storm had driven him into the abandoned foundry for cover, or perhaps, exhausted by his luggage, he had meant to hide out the night there. At any rate, he had dragged himself and his sorcerous make-up box under the iron crane, and the lightning had gone for his lair as though drawn by a magnet.

The old theatre chest was shivered to matchwood, and the ancient actor was no more than a crimson shadow, flattened to a mash.

So I will never know about the scar. History will never know. All I do know is this. Joseph Jefferson never played John Wilkes Booth, and there is no record of a St. Ellen who played John Wilkes Booth. But Booth played *Richard III*.

A HEALTH WARNING!

Printed in the interest of public well-being!

IF YOU'RE nursing a cold—*see a doctor!* Curing a cold is the doctor's business. But there are certain precautions which, if taken in time, may help you to ward off a cold.

For instance, your own doctor will tell you that when your body resistance is high, you are not apt to "take cold so easily." And he'll also tell you that "keeping regular" is a great aid in maintaining a higher resistance.

So, keep your bowels open! And when a laxative is needed, use Ex-Lax! Ex-Lax is mild and gentle, yet thoroughly effective. And Ex-Lax is a real pleasure to take—it tastes like delicious chocolate.

For more than 30 years, Ex-Lax has been America's favorite family laxative. It's as good for children as it is for grown-ups. At all druggists in 10¢ and 25¢ sizes. Get a box of Ex-Lax today!

When Nature forgets—remember

EX-LAX

THE ORIGINAL CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

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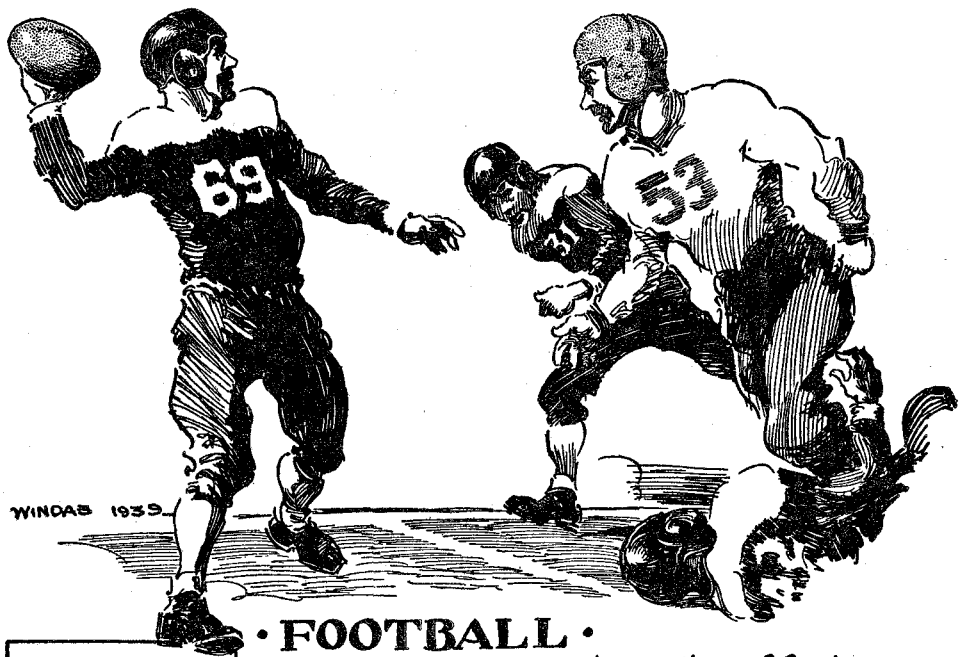
LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : BY W·A·WINDAS

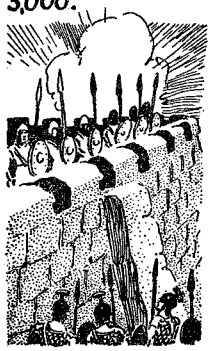


· FOOTBALL ·

Football was created by the soldiers of Sparta, and adopted by the ancient Roman army, whose officers looked upon the game as a good means of building up stamina in their troops.

· TROY ·

The siege of Troy lasted ten years, yet Troy occupied an area of less than five acres. Its largest dimension was 200 yards. The garrison could not possibly have exceeded 5,000 men, and was probably less than 3,000.



· MARTIAL MUSIC ·

The first modern army to march to music in cadence was the 15th century Swiss infantry. Its purpose was to enable commanders to better time advances etc.

· GIBRALTAR ·

When the Moslem invasion of Europe began, the Moslem general Tarik landed at this huge rock. He named it "Geb-el-Tarik", or Rock of Tarik. Later the name was corrupted to "Gibraltar".

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The coatless young man bailed madly, while the wind threatened to rip the scoop from his hand

Young Men and Prideful

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "The King of Halstead Street," "Board Fence," etc.

It was the sea that made them quarrel, and the sea, too, that kept them from striking out in fury; while within them, their anger seethed with the rising storm

"Young men and prideful, full of daring,
Overprone to profane swearing. . . ."
Moral Verses.

THERE were two of them, and they were prideful and full of daring, and unquestionably they were overprone to profane swearing. That is to say, they were young. One of them was tall and fiery-headed with smoky blue eyes the color of slate or of the sun-flecked stormy sea. The other was shorter and dark and more squarely built, with thick, powerful arms and a deep-chested frame. In the past their companionship had been one of high adventure, as the companionship of young men always is, whatever their station or their dwelling-place. They had been friends since always, and their friendship had seemed a strong and an eternal thing, which nothing on this earth or the worlds beyond could break. But it was broken.

It had taken only a missing motor to break it, and it took—as things turned out—a dying man to mend it. But they could not imagine any mending now.

It was dark, and their boat fought a

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losing race against pursuing winds and seas. It had shipped much water and was shipping more. The port light was out. The staccato *putt-putt-putting* of the motor was almost drowned out by the roar of many waters. The boat ran before the wind while its two owners hated each other with the bitter, implacable fury of young men unable to battle back to friendship.

They should have fought at once when the quarrel came. It was about a trivial thing. They had been far offshore. The land was but a thin line against the horizon. They were laboring mightily at their fish-lines. And the motor missed. Once or twice only. No more. But the shorter, dark one fanatically insisted that it must be adjusted at once, while the other maintained that it needed no attention.

The short one belligerently took off many working parts and adjusted them with much oil and grease and care. The flame-headed one seethed and his blue eyes snapped in dangerous sparklings. They were losing working-time while this motor-repair work went on five miles offshore.

And then the storm came up and the dark one bitterly insisted that the repair had been necessary, and the other raged that they would have been ashore long since but for the dark one's stupidity in working on the motor at that time and place.

As the storm increased, so did their anger. It became the corrosive hatred of young men who have never happened to fight each other, so that generosity was impossible to either. And they could not fight then, because there is no room for combat in a twenty-foot motorboat of which only the forward three feet are decked.

The boat rocked and swayed and heaved and pitched. Bubbling water roiled around, gushing over the gunwale in erratic spouts. Very far away through the darkness a light winked into being. It grew swiftly brighter and glared at them. Then it swiftly dwindled and went out. Darkness. Rain. Waves. And wind. The water sloshed crazily in the bottom of the boat. A minute. A minute and a half. The light winked into being, glared briefly at them, and dwindled and went out once more.

The dark young man at the wheel bellowed savagely above the wind and pounding of seas:

"The wind's almost around to nor'-east! When it gets there, with a clear sweep from the ocean, there's goin' to be one fool drownin'! You!"

The taller young man snarled. His red hair was dark and lank with rain-wet.

"There's the light anyways! We're headed right!"

He watched for the light again. They were driving for it with wind and sea behind them, and the wind swinging steadily for the north-east, which would mean heavier and more monstrous seas than these. When they came, no small boat could live.

THE light came on and glared and vanished. The larger of the young men groped his way forward and essayed to bail. He held fast to the pitching boat with one hand, and scooped up seawater with the other. He bailed and bailed and bailed. Sometimes the scoop filled with water and some of it went overboard. Sometimes it scraped futilely on bare planking. That was when the heaving of the boat had tilted the sloshing water away. Always more water came in. He seemed to gain nothing at all.

He crawled back to the stern, holding fast. He put his mouth close to the steersman's ear and bawled:

"No good! Your dam'—" Wind tore his words away.

The man at the wheel bellowed, "Yeah? The wind's shiftin' fast. When it gets nor'-east—"

The wind abruptly blew harder. The waves rose higher. The sound of rushing water became more intolerable. Raindrops and bits of spray ceased to seem like

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hail alone. The smaller droplets stung like birdshot. The larger ones felt like stones. The boat rode more heavily. The motor sputtered, but providentially resumed its staccato firing.

The young man at the wheel beckoned to the other to hold the boat's course. He stripped off his coat and put it over the engine. The rain and spray made a drumming noise upon his ribs. He heard it, if the other did not. The distant eye of light appeared, and waxed large and glaring, and winked out again.

Something huge and hissing and horrible came swiftly from astern. The boat rose sluggishly to it. It passed under an ran on ahead. The dark young man who had stripped off his coat groped forward. He bailed. And bailed. And bailed. The wind tried to drag the bailing-scoop from his hand. It beat down the sprays of water he would have flung overboard. It sent new and more terrible waves from a new direction to confuse the motion of the boat and combine with the other waves for its destruction.

The coatless young man bailed. And bailed. Another huge thing, hissing, passed underneath the boat. The wind blew harder still. It seemed now to whip white wave-crests off bodily and send them in a lashing smother over all the surface of the sea. The men in the motorboat could see nothing. Not even the flickering starboard light. But the distant eye appeared and glared through the storm-mist—with a ghostly halo about it—and winked out again.

The bailing man groped back to the stern again, panting. He bellowed as the other had done.

"No good! I told you there'd be a fool drownin' presently! But we'd mighty near! . . ." His square dark face was ugly with anger and despair.

The light was abruptly higher. Perception of the horizon did not exist in this darkness and with the boat tossed crazily by the waves, but the light did loom vaguely as at an elevation. It was above, in the sense that a low-lying star is above.

"If we can keep goin' fifteen minutes more," bellowed the redhead at the wheel, "maybe—"

The dark one snarled at him. This was truly enmity which should have called for more than a dying man to mend, considering the storm about them.

Another roaring, growling thing came from astern. It picked up the boat and shook it as a terrier might shake a rat before it swept on beneath and ahead. The coatless young man groped quickly forward again and bailed frantically. Water sloshed horribly in the cockpit. The boat tilted, and all the water ran forward, and the boat barely leveled before its weight was effective in burying the bow. The dark young man bailed. And bailed. And bailed.

THE light winked on and glared. It was markedly closer, but it did not seem friendly. It seemed even malevolent. Assuredly there was no offer of shelter, nor any hint that a dying man within it might end the hatred of these two.

It was near enough, though, to cast a trace of illumination upon the sea. It was a beam, which showed the waves as monstrous furrows veiled by a hurtling mist of spray and rain. Beyond the beam was sheer nothingness. It swept away and was a dimming blur. It vanished.

There came a dull sound of cannonading through the noise of all the storm. The redhead at the wheel roared:

"There 'tis! Five minutes more—"

The dark one, perhaps eight feet away, did not hear him. He bailed. Desperately. Frantically. He held fast with one hand and with the other made himself the center of a fountain. It arose inside the boat and was whipped away to nothingness by the wind. Perhaps he did not hear the sound as of guns, at first. But in a little while he raised his head. The redhead at the steering-wheel saw his chunky, overbearing silhouette when next the light glared briefly upon them. He heard it; yes. But then another growling thing came, and foam and seawater, mixed,

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half filled the boat, and he bailed more desperately still. Only the sacrificed coat kept the motor from drowning utterly.

Now the growling things came more often. They grew higher and more steep. After each, despite frenzied bailing, the boat held still a little more of water.

Yet the cannonading was very near and very loud indeed, and the light loomed high; so high that its brightest glare did not increase in brightness but seemed to sweep beyond the boat instead of on it. Once the boat—by sheer miracle—teetered crazily on the very crest of one of the monstrous sea-combers and actually shipped no water. In that instant they saw a turmoil just below the light. Rocks here intercepted the seas that had come across a thousand miles of ocean. Spray shot upward in cathedral-like masses, the whole made visible by a dim radiation from the lighthouse beam.

The noise was that of an intense barrage.

The whole drew swiftly nearer. With wind and waves and its own motor to urge it, the boat moved fast. Soon there was always a whitish glow about them, which at intervals of ninety seconds increased momentarily to a blinding brightness. At such instants the confusion of wind and water was daunting; was disheartening; was panic-inspiring. A racing mixture of air and sea above growling, curving rollers. Below that, oblivion. Above it, shrieking wind and nothingness.

The boat careened and rolled with a square figure bailing frantically at its middle and another, tall and spare, sitting tensely in its stern. Sometimes it came up out of a mist of flying water like a drowned thing rising from the deeps, and feeling a vague wonder at its own emergence. Sometimes it was lost in flying spray until it seemed impossible that it should ever rise to sight again.

At such times, certainly, a dying man in the lighthouse would have seemed of no importance whatever.

Especially, perhaps, when the sound of cannonading became so monstrous as no longer to be even a sound. It was a vibration; a deep-toned series of impacts conveyed through the water to the fabric of the boat. The light loomed almost overhead. In the radiance spreading out from it, the young men saw masses of leaping white, high as the masts of schooners. They heard roars which numbed their ears but beat upon their chests. They saw crawling, swirling masses of foam sweep down the island's sides to rejoin the turmoil of the sea.

The redhead at the wheel shifted it one spoke. Two. The dark young man bailed. And bailed. And bailed.

Then, very suddenly, the rocks were horribly close, and the wind was no longer a steady pressure but vast erratic puffs. Licking foam surged toward the boat and poured over its gunwale. The light swept past and became unmistakably behind. The wind grew more erratic still.

And suddenly the waves grew less.

THEY were in the lee of the islet on which the lighthouse was built. Here there was still a heavy sea, a choppy sea, but nothing approaching the smother through which the boat had come. The steering man turned the boat's bow still farther into the sheltered space. The small fountain which was the bailing continued to rise. The boat swayed and rolled and heaved and pitched.

The young men could see clearly here, because of the glow from the light overhead. These waves were covered with a multitude of ripples and made furry in appearance by the pouring rain.

The dark one bailed. The other steered.

"Made it in spite of y'dam' foolishness," snarled the flame head, savagely.

The dark one swore, his voice cracking from pure hatred.

Slowly, the boat made its way through water that became steadily less disturbed, until it reached a place where rocks formed approximately a dock. The bailing man moved forward, then, to make the boat fast. The engine stopped. The boat

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lifted and fell lazily, with wind screaming past overhead and rain falling in a whirling downpour.

The steersman relieved the man who once more bailed. He opened the door of the infinitesimal shelter in the bow of the boat. He backed out with a small tarpaulin. He put it over the engine and removed the coat. He wrung out the coat and flung it up on the wetly glistening rocks. Water went overside in rhythmic spurts from the bailer. Overhead, the glaring beam of the light made a stately revolution once in each ninety seconds. Rain glowed as if whitehot in its moving path. The bailing-scoop scraped and scraped and scraped.

The two young men got out of the boat. The dark one picked up the wrung-out coat and wrung it again. They moved together over a twisting path toward the lighthouse. As they climbed from the water's edge, the eddying gusts of wind grew stronger. Presently, when the full force of the wind struck them, they bent nearly double to face it. Here, too, great masses of foam and torn-away spray beat upon them from the waterside spoutings of the waves.

They fought their way to the small solid door in the base of the lighthouse. They pounded upon it loudly. Presently the door opened and a warm, dry, food-scented wind poured out upon them. They went in and the door bumped shut.

A big man had let them in. A huge man. He was tall and broad and thick. Taller than the redhead. His legs and arms were massive, and his barrel chest was big even in proportion to his body. He regarded them with curiously tired eyes. You see, there was a dying man in the lighthouse. But the young men did not know it.

"Bad out?" he asked. "How'd you make it in here?"

"Bad?" said the smaller of the young men, savagely, "Bad? It's hell! An' me out in it with a dam' fool!"

The other bristled. "Fool yourself! I told you—"

The shorter of the young men said with an elaborate restraint:

"We got here. Let it go at that. An' we're stayin' here. We were three-quarters swamped. I told him if we went on there'd be one fool drowned—an' there would've been!"

The big man said tiredly:

"Don't fuss. I'll bring you some dry clo'es. This wind'll last a couple of days, I'm guessin'."

He moved away. The shorter young man started to strip off his clothes where he stood. The other followed suit. It was startlingly quiet in the lighthouse. The walls were thick. The windows were tightly shuttered. The heavy cannonade outside seemed reduced to a not unpleasant growling sound which only served to emphasize the quietude within. There was no wind in here. The air was warm and dry. The two young men were acutely conscious of their safety as they peeled off garments which made a spreading puddle of seawater on the floor.

"Of all fool things to do!" raged the taller one, "to get us stalled out there with weather comin' up, just so's you could—"

"We came through, didn't we?" stormed the other in return. "That motor wasn't runnin' right! But it ran all right comin' here! If I hadn't worked on it—"

"We'd ha' been home before the weather came!" the redhead shouted. "Lord knows I' stood enough up to now, but I'm through! We're bustin' up right here an' this instant! If anybody ever sees me in a boat with a halfwit like you he's got a free license to kick me! If there's got to be a fool get drowned, there's no use me drownin' with 'im!"

The dark one said in a voice that cracked with fury:

"Yeah? I' been wishin' a long time that we were on shore where I could give you a coupla pokes!"

The tall young man said quickly, truculently:

"We' on shore now. Try takin' a coupla pokes at me an' see what happens!"

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"Why, y'—" the dark one cried and drew back a square hard fist.

THE taller youth swung furiously, his soaked clothing a heap on the floor. The other blocked and leaped into battle. Then followed panting breaths and sobs of pure hatred, and the thudding impacts of bare fists upon unshielded flesh. But this was no normal fight.

This was conducted with a bitter hatred which victory could not lessen nor defeat make greater. These young men in their pride had come to hate each other when they could not fight. Now no combat could heal their hatred.

It was red rage; blind wrath; fury as consummate as that which once moved a young man called Cain. Neither thought of blocking after the first instant. They flung themselves madly upon each other, striking with the will to kill. And the failure of each blow to slay only roused a despairing, passionate resolve that the next should annihilate. Had either fallen, it is possible that the other would have tried to throttle him.

They did not hear an angry growl from the stairway leading upward in the lighthouse. They did not hear the big man come more swiftly down the stairs. They fought terribly; despairingly; hopeless of venting their hatred even by the utter destruction they strove for. They did not know that anything existed outside of their hatred—until the big man threw them violently apart.

"Are y'crazy?" he demanded angrily. "What's the idea of actin' like this?"

"I'll kill that dam' fool yet!" panted the shorter one, sobbing. "I'll kill the dam' fool!"

"Not on Gov'ment property you won't," said the big man grimly.

He overtopped the taller by a head, and almost outweighed the pair of them. They advanced toward each other, sobbing hate, and he flung them back again.

It did not occur to them to attack him. They thought only of destroying each other. Thrown crashing against the stone wall, they came out and strove furiously to dodge him that they might assail each other again. Each saw his former comrade through a haze of red, and there was the salt taste of blood upon his lips.

The big man growled, and suddenly turned upon the larger of the pair. He knocked him sprawling, and whirled and as savagely battered the other to the ground. It was no difficult feat. They could not see him in their obsession of hate. They were like blind men; blind to everything but the object of their furies.

The big man picked up the shorter youth by the scruff of the neck.

"Come along!" he growled. "I'll get at the bottom of this—as if I didn't have enough to worry about!"

He flung clothing on the floor and half-marched, half-flung the panting, incoherently raging shorter young man up the stairs before him. He growled over his shoulder to the other on the floor, "Get some dry clo'es on an' sense in y'head, an' then come up!"

He vanished. The taller youth, on the floor, struggled up and searched the very dregs of his memory for words suitable to express his despairing rage. For a long time he literally wept from pure fury. But then he stooped and picked up the garments the big man had thrown down. He dried himself and donned the clothing, while his lips worked at forming phrases of hatred and of wrath. When he finished, his mouth was a thin straight line, save where it was swollen from a blow. His smoky eyes were hot.

HE clenched and unclenched his hands as he mounted the steps toward the upper regions. He met the big man coming down again. The big man folded his arms and barred the way.

"Well?" he said formidably. "Any more damfoolishness?"

The redhead swallowed and said harshly:

"A'right. If he keeps outa my way I'll keep outa his way—while we're here. But I'm goin' to get him yet!"

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Rage choked him. He panted at the bare thought of his enemy—who until a few short hours since had been his friend.

"I' stood enough of this!" said the big man sternly. "I' got plenty to worry me without a pair o' young fools tryin' to kill each other all over the place!"

"If he keeps outa my way I'll keep outa his," repeated the redhead harshly.

The big man said grimly, "Tim's dyin'. You know Tim. My helper. He's dyin' an' the light's got to be attended to. I'm not goin' to fool with you two young idiots! You—"

The tall young man repeated doggedly, his eyes evading contact, "If he keeps outa my way—" Then he said without interest, to change the subject forcibly from any possible promise to keep the peace. "What's the matter with Tim?"

"He's dyin'! He fell down the lantern-flight o' steps an' lit on his head on the concrete floor. His skull's cracked. He needs a hospital—an' the storm's gettin' worse every minute! He's dyin' right now an' I oughta be with 'im, instead of keepin' you two from killin' each other!"

The tall young man mumbled.

"Dyin'!" repeated the big man bitterly.

"I felt the place where his skull's cracked. An' there's no way on earth o' gettin' him to a doctor or a doctor to him, with the sea like it is an' still risin'. An' then you two young fools come in here, savin' your own worthless lives while Tim's dyin'!"

The redhead mumbled again. But gradually he became aware of sounds that he had failed to note for a little while past. The whining squeal of wind flowing with terrific force past an obstacle it could not make to quiver.

The wind was due northeast now. He heard the shuddering impact of masses of sea—to be weighed in hundreds or thousands of tons—plunging upon the rocky island on which the lighthouse was built. And he heard, too, a faint and distant and very monotonous *click-click-click-click* overhead, which was the gear-train moving the great light-beam completely around the horizon once in ninety seconds.

Unreasonably, the young redhead remembered the boat on the lee side of the island. It rose and fell and swayed and wabbled with the surge of water about it. It was twenty feet long, and it had a three-foot deck forward, and it had an engine which had proved remarkably reliable. But it had been swamping, before the seas rose to the height they had now attained. In these, it could not possibly live.

"Dyin', huh?" said the redhead, slowly. His eyes were still hot and raging, but his voice had changed. "D'you think he could stand the shakin'-up he'd get if I could take him over?"

The big man said, growling, "You couldn't take him. But if you could, he'd have to stand it! It's the only chance in Gawd's world he's got—gettin' to a doctor an' a hospital."

THE taller young man said spitefully, "Listen here! Gimmie four planks an' some tarpaulin an' a decent pump, an' I'll take him! Put the planks across the gun'ls for braces an' stretch the tarp for a deck. It'll leak, but I can take care of it with a decent pump! An' that fool upstairs—"

There came footsteps down the circular stairs. The dark young man appeared, carrying a huge bundle of loose stuff. He elaborately ignored his former comrade.

"I found some tarp," he told the big man with an effect of restraint. "Get me a hammer an' some nails an' I'll rig it."

"What's this?" demanded the redhead furiously. "You tryin' to put somethin' over—"

The big man growled, "He had the same idea you had. Cover the cockpit an' try to make it through. It's crazy."

"I'm goin' to do it myself!" raged the redhead. "An' I can lick anybody that says I ain't! If that dam' fool—"

"If he thinks," said the shorter one,

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with an elaborate, biting restraint, "that I'm countin' on him goin' with me—"

They glared at each other, panting in their fully revived hate. Their hands worked.

The big man said angrily, "Shut up, both of you! No one man can handle a boat in that sea! Both of you can't do it! To give Tim a chance, I'll let y'try if both of y'go, one to work the pump. But either one by himself, an' Tim stays here an' dies peaceful in his bed!"

The redhead swallowed. The chunky one raged. Then the taller said bitterly:

"I'd rather try it with a cat for comp'ny than him! But if he'll keep his dam' mouth shut, I'll keep offa him till I get Tim to a doctor."

The shorter young man flung the tarpaulin bundle to the ground and cursed. Then he picked it up again.

"We gotta have a hammer an' some nails, an' we oughta have some planks for braces," he said in a voice that was thick with hatred. "An' the pump y'said you had."

The big man went slowly up the stairs. During his absence the young men looked at each other and shook with blood-lust. The big man came down the stairs again and gave a new load to the taller of the pair.

"Here," he said heavily. "If y'decide not to try it, there's no shame in it. I ain't askin' you to do anything. I just ain't got the nerve to throw away the only chance Tim's got."

The young men seized their separate bundles and unbolted the door. They went out into the storm, bracing themselves to fight the wind. The roar that came in the open door was appalling.

The big man shook his head hopelessly as he made the door fast again. He turned and trudged up the stairs that wound round and round and round in the lighthouse shaft. Inside, here, the scream of the wind was reduced to a whining sound, but it rose in pitch as he climbed higher. The monotonous *click-click-click-click* of the gear-train grew louder. The thunder of monster waves upon the rocks. More than once the whole building quivered when some lesser mass of water, flung high, actually drove against the stone wall of the building itself.

He came to the top and made sure that everything moved properly. The inside of the lantern was blisteringly hot, but it was immaculately clean and very, very perfect in its functioning. The lighthouse keeper went down again.

WHEN the young men came back, they were as soaked, as saturated, as on their first arrival. The shorter one handed back the tools. The taller one said briefly:

"The tarp's on. We'll put Tim nearly all under it. Just his head out where we'll be."

The big man said, "I ain't fixed him. Y'sure y'want to try it?"

The short young man spat. The taller one said angrily, "D'you suppose I'd ha' stood—him around," he jerked his thumb contemptuously at his former comrade—"if I wasn't goin' to take Tim over?"

"I'll get him," said the big man.

He went up the steps. The shorter young man turned to his former friend. "We' goin' to take turns pumpin'," he said insultingly," an' steerin' the boat."

The redhead said spitefully, "Yeah. An' somebody's got to poke around once in a while an' make sure the little tarp stays over the engine."

Then they were malevolently silent until the big man came down the stairs, carrying without effort a load that would have taxed either of the younger men. He had wrapped his burden in blankets and put oilskins about it, lashed in place.

"Y'sure y'want to try it?" he asked again, formidably.

"Hell, yes!" snapped the short, square young man.

The big man threw open the door and strode out into the storm. The young men followed. Rain pelted them. Wind buffeted them. Sound beat upon their ears. It was necessary for them to steady

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the big man against the worst of the wind-gusts upon his burden.

They reached the boat, strangely changed by the makeshift cover stretched on makeshift braces over all but the very stern end of the cockpit. The young men held the boat still. The big man carefully lowered his burden. They stowed it so that the unconscious man's head was not altogether out of sight, but would be shielded from the worst of the wind and spray.

They got in the boat. The taller young man crawled under the improvised shelter which they hoped would prevent the swamping of the boat. He started the engine. The smaller young man pushed off. The big man bellowed above the wind which screamed overhead:

"Luck!"

His arm saluted them.

The shorter young man roared back, "We'll need it! Else there's goin' to be one fool drownin' sure, an' I won't stand much chance!"

He jerked his thumb to indicate his hidden companion as the fool. The boat swung around. The dark head appeared. The other seized the wheel and steered off toward the blackness and the mountainous seas beyond the light. The last the big man saw was the shorter man rigging the pump so that as he sat in the stern of the boat he could pump overboard regardless of the wind.

The big man went back to the lighthouse. He was almost ashamed that he had remained at his post of duty instead of risking his life with the young men who cursed each other and hated each other, yet depended so completely upon each other in this emergency.

BUT they felt no shame. They drove away from the light, and as the darkness deepened the sea about them rose. Wind picked up spray and flung it upon them. Rain poured down. Behind them the light dwindled swiftly. They had come down-wind to the shelter of the lighthouse island. They had only to continue down-wind to arrive at further shelter and permanent security. But behind them came something which spat and growled and roared all at once, and above it the wind screamed malevolently, and the boat heaved and pitched and wallowed and rolled, and in all the universe there seemed but two fixed things. One was the turmoil about them, and the other was the racket of the motor.

The boat fought through the first wave and the second and the tenth and twentieth. The shorter young man pumped rhythmically, and foam and water, mixed, went whipping overside. The redhead leaned from the wheel to bellow in his companion's ear.

"Worse'n I thought!" He blinked salt water out of his eyes and spat salt water out of his mouth. "Steerin's easier'n pumpin'. When y'get tired we'll swap."

The shorter young man bent over in his turn. The taller one cupped his ear to listen. Spray drenched them. Wind deafened them. Mountainous waves strove to overwhelm and bury them.

But the voice came finally.

"I'm—all right so far," roared the shorter man across the six-inch interval between lips and ear. "I'm all right! But leavin' the lighthouse for this—" He gasped as hard-flung water hit him shrewdly. "Leavin' the lighthouse for this—proves that if anything happens it'll be *two* dam'fools that's drowned!"

The light-beam from the distant lighthouse smote upon them vaguely. In its thinned-out beam he saw the redhead's sudden, warm, and half-drowned grin. Then darkness fell and the storm really began to try to batter them under. But that did not matter now, to either of the pair. Because—well—their companionship had quite suddenly again become one of high adventure, and they were once more young men prideful and full of daring, though possibly overprone to profane swearing.

That is to say, they were young.

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The lynch mob halted, gaping at the incredible scene

A Complete Novelet

By HERBERT A. WOODBURY

Tinhorn

On a green baize table Randolph Calhoun re-fought the Civil War—and his maneuvers with his fifty-two man company would have stunned General Lee

I

THE voice was loud, booming and belligerent: "So the South fought for its honest convictions? And what does that demonstrate, gentlemen? What were those honest convictions of the South? Slavery! Treason! Rebellion!"

Ten years had passed now since Lee had surrendered to Grant; yet out on the frontiers of the new West, the war was still being fought. You could not escape it even here in the lonely town of Pine Mesa. And always, of course, the Southerner was the underdog.

Randolph Calhoun was thinking this, the color of anger flowing up into his sensitively patrician face, as he turned his head and glanced down the bar. Dark eyes narrowing, Calhoun stared at the tall, broad-shouldered, raw-boned man who had spoken; even now in his silence he was truculent.

Beside the hulking giant, stood a man more delicately built, with almost feminine, smoothly handsome features. This one said laconically to his huge companion:

"Sure, Gowan, the Southerners were all renegades. You've told us that before. But we ain't looking for a fight, tonight. We've got an appointment, if you'll remember, for a poker game. Come on." He took the other's arm and piloted him across the room.

With a sort of dreamy intensity, Calhoun's eyes followed the pair. There in the very center of the barroom, a double-decked, green-baize-covered poker table stood vacant, evidently reserved. The two men took chairs and sat down. In a second two others joined them, and a waiter came over with cards and chips.

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Calhoun, his dark eyes still angry, glanced at the bartender. "And jest who," he demanded, "would them gentlemen over there happen to—"

The bartender, recipient for a week now of Calhoun's munificent tips, was quick with his information.

"Why, the big, loud-mouthed one's Travis Gowan," he said. "Corporal or sergeant or somethin' in the Pennsylvania militia, durin' the war. You Rebs burned his farmhouse, bankrupted him when you destroyed Chambersburg, and he's never forgot it. Sort of a tic with him. He ain't quite sane on the subject.

"But otherwise, when he ain't got a drink or two in him to start him off, he's all right enough. Lumber king. Come in here right after the war. Slaved like a dog; been saltin' his savin's for ten years in timber lands. Year ago, when the railroad pushed in and made them timber lands valuable, he started cashin' in. Practically a millionaire.

"Gent with him's named Yarnell. Kin of some sort to the gal Gowan married last year. Went East as soon as he struck it rich, Gowan did. Brought back a bride and also this hombre, Yarnell. As for the other two gents—wouldn't know 'em. Never seen 'em in here before. But Gowan must know 'em. Gowan or Yarnell, or they wouldn't be playin' with 'em."

"Meanin'?" Calhoun asked.

"Prosperity ain't all that the railroad's brought in here, partner," the bartender said. "Town's full of shysters, grifters, card-cheatin' tinhorns and such."

"I see," said Calhoun. The bartender had slid the bottle toward him. Calhoun refilled his glass, pouring two ounces of the Kentucky Bourbon into a glass which, rimmed, would have held four. He opened his bulging wallet, laid down a hundred-dollar bill. But the bartender pushed it back at him. "On me, sir."

CALHOUN didn't pick up the bill. He repeated, "I see. Then there'd be danged little chance of me walkin' over to that table, introducin' myself, and respectfully suggestin' that five-handed makes a better game than four?"

He edged the bill back toward the bartender who stared down at it a moment.

"Why—why, I dunno, sir. Mebbe I could . . . But you're a Southerner. Captain, you told me, under Jeb Stuart. Wouldn't be very pleasant for you, would it, to—" The man broke off, eyes lighting up in sudden, shrewd comprehension. He said, "I see what you mean, sir. You were thinkin'—"

"Thinkin'," said Calhoun dreamily, "that the ideal setup for a poker game is to play with honest gentlemen, Joe. But the honest gentlemen mustn't be your friends. If the stakes are high, and the game's for blood, 't'ain't no fun to lose to your friends, and it ain't much more fun if they lose to you. The ideal set-up is when you hate the livin' daylights of the gent you're playing against."

The bartender picked up the hundred-dollar bill and pocketed it. Calhoun watched him move out from behind the bar, cross the room to the table where the fanatical Northerner was playing.

He saw the bartender bend over Gowan's chair and say something. He saw Gowan's head jerk up, and felt the blue eyes bore into him from across the room. And then he heard Gowan's voice boom forth:

"Why certainly, Joe. If you know the man and can vouch for him. If he's what he says he is. Nothing would please me more than to send a Johnny Reb out of here without his shirt. Only you'd better warn him—we ain't playin' for pennies, and we ain't acceptin' no IOU's. If he wants to play, he's got to—"

Calhoun had already started to move. He crossed to the poker table, an elegant, assured figure in his black frock-coat, frilled white shirt and bright, flowered waistcoat. Reaching Gowan's side, he bowed stiffly; then he laid his wallet on the table. And for once, his wallet contained, not two genuine bills sandwiching a thick wad of stage money, but an ample supply of real bank-notes.

"I think," said Calhoun, "that you'll find

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ample funds there, sir. But as for forcin' me to walk out of here without my shirt, I'm lookin' forward to better luck, this time, than when Sherman marched through Georgia. . . ."

The handsome Yarnell smiled and said something about that being the idea upon which good poker games and good horse races were founded. The bartender introduced Calhoun—"wealthy Georgia planter" —and as always Calhoun had the decency to wince inwardly a little at the fiction. Yarnell presented the two other players—a Mr. Meggs, drummer for a Chicago hardware house and a Dr. Ainsworth from Denver.

Yarnell made a place for Calhoun between himself and Gowan. Calhoun took his seat, wondering grimly whether he would have the luck to take this belligerent Northerner into camp.

SMOKE in blue layers hung there in the barroom. In the corner a thin consumptive kid banged the music box. Outside, the July thunderstorm continued to rage. There at a table for five, chips clicked, cards fell. . . .

The hands on the clock above the bar moved from nine to eleven.

A warm glow of satisfaction had spread through Calhoun. He had hoped for luck and he was having it. At the start of the evening, he had miraculously drawn and filled a straight flush at a time when Gowan, the truculent lumber king, had held a full house. An hour later Calhoun had filled a second straight flush against Gowan when the latter held four treys. And now—

Dr. Ainsworth had dealt the hand. Gowan, next to Ainsworth, had opened. Calhoun, looking at the queen, the jack, the ten, the nine of spades and the trey of diamonds, had come in without raising. Yarnell, next in line, had raised. Gowan had raised back. As for the others, Ainsworth had folded his hand, squeezed out by the action. And the drummer Meggs was long since out of the game. Meggs had been ahead when Calhoun had entered; had started to lose and, with luck running against him, had prudently decamped while he was still ahead. Ainsworth had dropped, then; Gowan had raised. And Calhoun had played along for the principle of the thing. A man didn't drop when he had a one-card draw to a straight, a flush, or a straight flush. But neither did a man who had been lucky enough to fill two straight flushes expect to fill a third.

Now the action preceding draw had finally ended. Gowan had drawn one card, Calhoun one, Yarnell two. Gowan's thin Pennsylvania nasal was lifting, "Betting fifty dollars . . ." And Randolph Calhoun was staring blinkingly at five cards—all spades. Five cards in a sequence headed by the king! The king, the queen, the jack, the ten, the nine! His third straight flush in approximately two hours—the sort of hand that most men didn't expect to hold three times in a lifetime. . . .

In that instant, time and space seemed to dissolve before Calhoun. The smoke-filled barroom became another room, in Abilene, nine years ago. There he'd held such a hand as this—his third straight flush in the course of a single evening—playing against four tough trail-bosses. And what an uproar that hand had caused!

No one until that evening had suspected him of cheating. No one knew that, returning to his burned plantations after the war, he had found Lucy Page married to a war-time profiteer; and that in his rankling bitterness he had come out West to become a gambler. He could have left Abilene that night with a fortune if he had not forced the play so hard that at last the other men had realized what was happening.

He had been very close to death at the hands of those four trail-bosses. That had been nine years ago—and he had not gambled crookedly since. But it was not the memory of his miraculous escape from death that had transformed him into an honest gambler. There had been something far more important.

Lucy Stone had died. And dying, she had confessed the truth to Calhoun's brother John, back home. "I loved Rand,

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but I married Brook Clark because it didn't seem fair to saddle Rand with my family's debts and the responsibility of looking after my brothers and sisters . . ." John had relayed the message six months ago. And Calhoun, understanding at last, heart broken but no longer bitter, had ended permanently his career as a crooked gambler.

Yes, he tried to blot out the shameful memory of that night in Abilene when a quick-triggered trail-boss had counted the deck and found only forty-seven cards. But now in this smoke-filled barroom he saw that scene again. He felt once more the trembling terror he'd felt that night as he'd backed out a pair of swinging doors, a smoking army pistol in his hand. There had been a fast horse outside. He had found his faithful Sam waiting for him, armed and holding outstretched the reins of a swift palomino stallion.

But tonight. . . .

GOWAN'S voice jarred him out of his reverie. "You still in this, Calhoun? Or is it my tough luck, now that I've drawn a real hand, to have you drop?"

Slowly, Calhoun's eyes came up from his straight flush. He looked into the glinting eyes of the giant Northerner. Eyes alit, now, with unconcealed triumph. And he wondered . . . Sam wasn't with him, tonight, to be waiting outside with the reins of a swift horse. Sam had taken a brief holiday bear hunting.

For a second, Calhoun had the cautious, prudent urge to toss his hand into the discard. The South was avenged; he was into Gowan already for two thousand dollars. What more did he want? His urge to caution was brief, though; an instant afterward he was asking himself why he shouldn't play the cards out. His fingers had done no trickery with the cards tonight. Fantastic and miraculous as his draw had been, it had been honest.

Calhoun's fingers, as long and as gracefully tapered as those of the surgeon across the table, reached for his chips. Tense and poised, he said, "Your fifty, and—" There'd been no limit set, but all that night, as if by tacit agreement, no one had bet more than a hundred dollars at a time. "And a hundred."

Wistfully, Yarnell surveyed his cards. Then he said: "I've a feelin' three treys ain't even in this. But a man hates to throw 'em down. I'm callin'."

"And I—" said Gowan. He looked at Yarnell. All evening long Yarnell had been staking him. Millionaire though Gowan might be, the storm had caught him in town with only pocket money. On three different occasions he'd had to borrow from Yarnell. And now he borrowed again. "How much you got there, Jack? Enough to—"

Yarnell laughed. "There ain't no sense in it, is there? Lendin' the man the money to beat me?" Affably though, he tossed his wallet to Gowan.

At the first opportunity to crack back at Calhoun, Gowan exceeded what thus far all evening had been the tacitly agreed upon as limit bet. "Filled, huh? Then your hundred, Calhoun, and five hundred." And Calhoun, without a murmur, accepted the changed status of the game. "And five hundred back at you, sir." He tossed the last of his chips into the pot, and went deep into his wallet before he paused to consider.

But then a moment later, Calhoun did consider. He paused; glanced again at his hand. A king, a queen, a jack, a ten, a nine—all spades. The highest hand in the whole deck, save one. It came to Calhoun belatedly that Gowan also had drawn one card. Gowan could hold—fantastic though it seemed—a straight flush, also! A royal straight flush, headed by the ace!

For a second Calhoun was dizzy with indecision. Should he call, while he still had a few hundred left? Before Gowan was in a position to make good his threat of sending him out of the barroom without his shirt? But then his courage returned. Two straight flushes out against each other on an honest deal—the one topping the other by a single spot? The thing was impossible.

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Calhoun delved for the last time into his wallet. He said quietly, "You jest raised me another five hundred dollars. I seem to have twelve hundred left. If you'd care to correct your bet and make it for seven hundred more, I'm callin'. I'm either high hand, sir, or I'm dead broke."

There across the table, Gowan's eyes glinted again. "Then you're dead broke, sir, I'm afraid." The man tossed in seven hundred more, which Calhoun covered with the last bill from his wallet. "Because I'm holdin' the same hand you twice beat me with. I've got the straight flush this time, Calhoun!"

II

TRIUMPHANTLY, Gowan put down the heart queen, the heart knave, the heart ten, the heart nine, the heart eight. And for an eternity, it seemed, Calhoun sat there. Two straight flushes out against each other on the same honest deal? The one topping the other by a single spot? Impossible, he had said. Yet there were the two hands and his own was tops! He'd won—how much, he hadn't any idea, nor did the precise amount matter to him. All that mattered now . . .

Calhoun got to his feet. With his left hand, he tossed his cards face-up on the table. The thumb of his right hand, he hooked into his gun-belt, mere inches above the mother-of-pearl butt of his army pistol. He said in a voice that was thin and strained: "There you are sir; toppin' you by a single—"

He didn't finish. Gowan was even swifter than he had imagined the man would be. The hulking giant was on his feet in a bound, hand sweeping for a holster. He said nothing. The odds against such a hand as this made explanations unnecessary. Travis Gowan had been cheated—cheated by a renegade Southerner. His gun cleared leather—and there was a shot.

That shot seemed to send Gowan hurdling back, as Calhoun stood there, smoking pistol still aimed. And then there was a gasp of amazement from the crowd at the bar. Gowan had staggered a few steps, knocked off balance by the impact of Calhoun's bullet; but he stood there now, unharmed except for a stinging hand. Calhoun had fired for his weapon, not his body; and the shot had knocked the gun neatly from Gowan's hand. The big man was wavering, his face ashen.

Calhoun's voice lifted. "I know, sir. It was the natural conclusion to be drawn. But I assure you on my honor as a gentleman that it's the wrong conclusion. I've spared your life, sir, in order to hear your apologies."

Around the barroom men crawled out from under tables and chairs. And there was a dead silence as Gowan struggled for his voice. At length, quivering with rage, he found it.

"I'm makin' no apologies," Gowan roared. "No honest game ever held the hands you've held tonight. You're a cheat, sir. And as for sparin' my life—maybe you were thinkin' of your own neck when you done it. Or maybe all it proves is that you're as handy at reachin' for a gun as you are at takin' a cold hand out of your boot top. Ainsworth! Hang onto the deck, there. Count the cards, and I'll stake my life all you'll find is forty-seven—"

Later that night Calhoun was to realize that there had been real courage in Gowan's outburst, and that he, himself, should have submitted to a count of the pack. But standing there facing Gowan, he could not control the hot anger rising in him.

"If anybody touches that pack," Calhoun said with deceptive softness, "I'll kill him. You've had my word of honor. Ainsworth, give me that—"

HE DIDN'T finish. Nor did he get the deck. Yarnell with a leap was at Ainsworth's side; he seized the pack and hurled it out the open window into the storm. Yarnell turned back. "There, sir," he said pleasantly to Calhoun. "As far as I'm concerned, and as far, I'm sure, as Doc Ainsworth's concerned, nobody's doubtin' your integrity. The game was honest."

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Yarnell came on round the table to Travis Gowan and took Gowan's arm. "Come on, gentlemen. There's enough left in my wallet for a drink. Drinks for all of us." To Gowan: "You damned fool, he's spared your life once. You want to stand here and egg him into killin' you?" He looked at Calhoun. "Come on, everybody. Let's have a drink."

Calhoun said nothing. And for a moment Gowan, too, was silent, still staring at Calhoun. Then the huge man rapped out one word: "Cheat!" And turning his back abruptly, he permitted Yarnell to lead him off to the bar.

Calhoun lingered only a second with Ainsworth. The doctor said, "Well, that's that," got up and joined the other two. Calhoun redeemed his chips by taking cash out of a cigar box. He pocketed his mountain of bills. He didn't stop at the bar where the other three were drinking. Without knowing why, he felt suddenly very weary. It was only a little after eleven, hours before he generally retired, but he thrust through the stained glass swinging doors into the main hotel lobby.

The desk clerk hailed him. "Mr. Calhoun, I've managed it—"

Foot on the red-plush carpet of the staircase, Calhoun turned back. "Managed what, boy?"

"Why, what you asked me, two-three days ago. I've got you out of 314 into a better room. Corner bedroom on the—" The boy came toward him with a key. "203, sir. You'll find your baggage moved in."

Calhoun's hand went to his pocket. He tipped the boy with a hundred-dollar bill; left the youngster standing there dazedly staring at the banknote, and continued on up the grand staircase.

Five minutes later, he sat down on a great double bed in a plush-upholstered room which was, indeed, considerably more magnificent than his previous quarters. But the greater luxury failed to rouse him from his mood.

Suddenly, now, he was very lonely. And it was not merely the result of Sam's absence; it went far deeper than that. There in his mind's eye, he saw his ruined Georgia plantations; he saw his ten years of futile wandering; he saw Lucy's face. And he remembered that tonight he'd tried to win the war which Lee had lost. That, he realized now, had been a futile and childish gesture, as useless as his dream that somehow he could alter his own past. He could not change anything that had happened.

All he could do now was to make some effort to atone for past mistakes. And tonight, he thought bitterly, he had gone into a game, driven by a senseless desire for revenge against a man he did not even know. His atonement—to stir up rankling hates that should be left to die.

Calhoun went to bed and finally to sleep with the storm beating outside his room. He slept well at length; but it was mostly because of the heavy thunder that he did not hear the sound of two shots later that night.

MURKY daylight streamed in the east window of his room, as the knock, sounding a second time on his door, aroused Calhoun from his slumbers. He swore colorfully, still half asleep. Doubtless the chambermaid who took care of this floor hadn't been appraised that Captain Calhoun didn't breakfast until noon. He demanded, "Who's there?"

The voice from the corridor said, "The law, sir. Open up!"

Calhoun touched the thick bear rug with his feet. Uneasily he went to the door. But if Gowan had made charges against him, such unjust charges could not be made to hold, he told himself.

A tall, lank bean-pole of a man in a hat with a stiff, military brim faced him. "Sorry, sir, but it's my unpleasant duty to . . ." And the rest of the officer's speech blurred for a second for Calhoun. "Chambermaid found the door of 314 standin' ajar early this mornin'. Man in there dead. Shot in the back while he slept—"

With an effort, Calhoun kept his voice level. "And you're accusin' me?"

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The man with the star smiled wryly. "Not of killin' him, sir. Nope. We picked up two empty brass shells there on the rug. We got the gun that fired them shells. And we got the man that pulled the trigger. Travis Gowan.

"Well, the setup's this, apparently. Gowan lost heavily at poker to you, last night. Game ended with gun-play, I'm told. Followin' the game, Gowan had a couple of drinks with Jack Yarnell and Dr. Ainsworth; then he left them and went upstairs. Only not to bed. Not right away. He evidently stopped at the lobby desk to look at the register and see which room was yours.

"And only an accident saved your life, Calhoun. Clerk it seems had transferred you to 203. Only he'd neglected to note the change on the blotter. The room number standin' opposite your name was still 314. And Gowan, goin' to 314, there in the darkness and everything, killed the wrong man. I'm takin' you up the street as a material witness to testify at the . . ."

The officer's voice trailed off. Calhoun remained unmoving before him, his face expressionless. But in his mind the same phrases repeated again and again: The poker game had brought death to one man and would send another to the gallows. And this was his responsibility—the result of his silly, vindictive urge to score over a Yankee stranger.

Mechanically Randolph Calhoun dressed and accompanied the officer up the street. He sat there in the dirty little courtroom at the coroner's inquest facing his companions of last night's game—Ainsworth, Yarnell, Gowan. And some one else, even harder to face—Travis Gowan's loyal wife.

Edith Gowan was older than he had expected she would be. Hers was the mature beauty of a woman a year or two past thirty. And now Calhoun, watching her, found something magnificent in her wild outburst when the bailiff brought Travis Gowan into the room. Swiftly she reached her husband, and, her white arms around his neck, she clung to him. She clawed at the bailiff who tried to drag her away when the coroner rapped for the hearing to commence. She struck out blindly at her kinsman. Yarnell, when he endeavored to soothe her; but at last they forced her into a seat.

The inquest was brief, cut-and-dried, and terribly clear. There was the case—open and shut—as outlined by the sheriff a half hour previously to Calhoun: the poker game—Gowan's rage when Calhoun had "cheated" him—the gunplay—the gruesome discovery this morning by the chambermaid—the two empty brass shells which fitted the two empty chambers in Gowan's uncleaned gun! That was the inquest, all of it—unless you cared to include Travis Gowan's futile declaration:

"I went upstairs still mad enough to've faced Calhoun and shot it out with him the next mornin', I'll admit. But I swear to God I didn't stop at the desk to look up the number of his room in the register. I swear I went to my room and didn't leave it. I'd had three-four drinks there at the bar, you see. Tossed 'em down fast, not realizin' in my anger that I was drinkin' so many. By the time I got to my room, they'd begun to hit me. I was so groggy—"

"That you're forgettin' what you did?"

"That all I cared about was gettin' to sleep. I hit the pillow and was out—like that."

Gowan's voice trailed. The coroner's panel brought in its inevitable verdict; the bailiff took Travis Gowan back to his cell to be held without bail for trial in two weeks for murder. There beside Yarnell, Gowan's wife slumped, and Yarnell caught her in his arms. And Randolph Calhoun, sick at heart, lingered in the stuffy courtroom only long enough to post the thousand dollars cash bail which required his appearance again in two weeks as a material witness.

III

THE storm of the night before had cleared. The bright sunlight beat down on the town as Calhoun reached the plank sidewalk and fresh air. He turned and

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walked on past the false fronts and the crowded hitching rails. He mounted the white-pillared veranda of the New Dominion House, made for the bar. Even in his tinhorn days, he thought grimly, he had never been so shaken that he wanted alcohol before food.

"Double Bourbon," he told Joe, the bartender.

Joe slid him the bottle and the glass in stoney silence. Then, in answer to Calhoun's look, Joe said:

"That's right, Mr. Calhoun, I didn't say good mornin' to you. Don't feel so good this mornin'; that's all." Joe's hand went into his pocket; brought forth a hundred-dollar bill which he tossed toward Calhoun. "There's your blood money."

"My—"

"The bill you give me, last night, to introduce you into the game. Don't want no part of it, now. It looks red to me, this mornin'—not orange. Should have looked red to me last night, only you took me in pretty well with that build-up of yours. And, God help me, I vouched for you to Gowan, believin' you was a gentleman."

Calhoun's hand froze on the bottle. "Then you believe I—"

"What else is there for me to believe? Your straight flush toppin' his by one spot? Your refusin' to let the cards be counted. I ain't condonin' cowardly murder; I ain't necessarily standin' up for Gowan. Man's got a hangin' comin' to him. Shame, though, he can't hang for what he set out to do." Two hostile eyes bored into Calhoun's. "If you savvy what I mean?"

"I savvy," said Calhoun quietly, "what you mean, Joe." He poured his drink, gulped it, poured a second. He picked up the bill which Joe had tossed him. He didn't blame Joe. No, two straight flushes out against each other on a single honest deal—the sheer wonder was that he hadn't been jumped by three men, last night.

He walked on upstairs; back to his room.

It happened instantly—the second after he had fitted his key into the lock and had stepped inside onto the thick, lush carpet. He stood face to face with the woman whom he had last seen as Jack Yarnell strove futilely to comfort her. Travis Gowan's wife, two tiny splotches of scarlet in her pale white cheeks, her dark eyes burning.

Edith Gowan held a tiny two-barreled derringer in her hand. Quietly, she said, "Close the door after you, sir. Softly."

Softly, Calhoun closed the door after him.

And then, as quietly and determinedly as she had spoken before, the woman said, "I—I'm going to kill you, sir. I guess you know that. But first, I'm going to tell you why."

STIFFLY, Calhoun stood there. Crisscrossed gunbelts hung across his flowered waistcoat, but he made no move for the mother-of-pearl butts of his guns.

"I know, ma'am. You're going to kill me, because I—" He thought of Joe, downstairs, implicitly believing he had cheated Travis Gowan. He saw that Gowan's wife believed it just as implicitly. And why he wanted to convince her differently, he didn't know. It didn't matter now. ". . . because," he went on, "by getting into that game of poker last night, I set in motion the train of circumstances that are going to end now in—"

"In Travis Gowan's not living to see a son of his born, sir."

The dark eyes silenced him. He had meant to insist that the card game had been honest, but now, he knew, he would not even say that. For her white beautiful face and her burning eyes told him that it would be useless to explain. And it did not seem to matter, really; in this instant, facing death, his only feeling was admiration for this woman's beauty and for her magnificent devotion.

"I have nothing to live for from the day Travis Gowan is hanged."

Then a softness came into her voice, almost as if she were talking to herself. "You see, I waited thirteen years for Travis. I was seventeen, when the war

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broke out. I waited for four years the first time. And then waited nine more. Because he didn't marry me, after the war. He came home to find the farm that you Rebels had burned foreclosed by the bank. And he was proud, Mr. Calhoun. I'd have married him, penniless or not. In spite of my family's objections. Only he—

"Well, you see my family was better off than his. So much so, that even in the beginning he'd hardly had the courage to propose to me. And as far as afterward was concerned . . ." The woman smiled; the radiance lit up her face. "He hadn't anything, the way he looked at it, to offer me after the war. He broke the engagement. Leaving me free—hoping that I wouldn't marry the other man, of course. But giving me the chance to, if I wanted. And then he headed West, Mr. Calhoun.

"Not to cheat at cards, as you did. Not to get rich, the easy, dishonest way. But to work—and it took him nine years. Nine years on top of the four I'd waited already. I was thirty when he came back a year ago. I've had him one year, Mr. Calhoun. Just a single year."

The voice broke. "I had my hope to buoy me up those thirteen years that I waited. But if they hang him, that ends hope, doesn't it? That ends everything. They can hang me, too. So—so you see why I'm going to kill you?"

The voice stopped; an index finger tightened on one of the derringer's double triggers. And still Calhoun made not the slightest move to defend himself.

He understood even more clearly now—because her story and Travis Gowan's was his own. He too had returned from the war to find himself bankrupt. His romance, also, the war had blasted. That far their tragic stories were alike, and because they were, he had to die. But, knowing that, he saw, too, the inevitable result of his own death. Edith Gowan would hang.

Calhoun poised himself. Somehow, he must wrest that gun from her hand.

He started forward. Her finger squeezed the trigger; the derringer blasted. Calhoun felt the white-hot burn of lead across his ribs. And simultaneously a dusky form leaped past him, like black panther.

Sam!

Sam had returned from his bear hunt. He had come straight to the hotel to find his master; up to the room—and he had opened the unlocked door to face a woman with a leveled derringer. That fraction of a second Edith Gowan's eyes had lifted from the sights; and a bullet intended for Calhoun's heart had grazed his ribs instead.

Sam was across the room, now, seizing the woman's wrist before she could transfer her finger to the second trigger. The derringer was slipping from Edith Gowan's grasp. Hand pressed tight against his wound, Calhoun was flinging himself to the corridor door which Sam had left open.

"It's nothing, folks—nothing. Cleanin' my gun. It went off, nicked me—"

He slammed the door shut and turned back. Edith Gowan had fainted.

IV

HOURS later, that afternoon, his wounded side professionally bandaged, Calhoun sat there in an easy chair sipping the sort of julep which only Sam could make. A liberal bribe to a chambermaid had got Edith Gowan, still in a state of emotional collapse, into another room. Calhoun had hovered nearby until Yarnell had been sent for and had arrived with a doctor who had put the woman under an opiate. Yarnell and the doctor, he had easily pledged to secrecy. Yarnell, after all, was the woman's cousin. Dr. Smith was a gentleman. There had been no hitch; no story of a derringer.

Calhoun faced Sam now. "And that's the story, boy."

Sam didn't comment at once. Thoughtfulness lined the ebony face. Ten minutes elapsed, perhaps, before Sam finally lifted his troubled glance to Calhoun.

"And you say you play *hones'* pokah, las' night?" Sam asked.

Calhoun's eyes came up with a start. "Why, of course I—" He broke off. "You don't mean you doubt me, Sam?"

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Bravely, Sam's eyes met Calhoun's. "No, Cap'n," he said in a voice that tried to carry conviction. "I don' doubt you. You say it, and I believe it. You fill three straight flushes in an evenin'; hold the las' one when the othah man hol' one, too. Shore, Cap'n, I believe you, only— Cap'n, how long we figgerin' on stayin' in this town?"

Calhoun told him. "Looks like at least two weeks, Sam. We're bein' held as a material witness in a thousand-dollar bail."

"An' how much you win from this man Gowan?"

"Ain't counted it yet, Sam. Ain't felt like countin' it. I dunno. Six, seven, eight thousand."

"Thereby leavin' us," said Sam, "plenty of profit, even if we forfeit that bail—huh, Cap'n?"

Calhoun blinked. "Forfeit?"

Sam nodded. "That woman, Cap'n. She not foolin', you know. Somethin' tell me she ain't goin' give up. She call on us again. Either her or mebbe that there cousin o' hers, do it for her. An' mebbe our luck turn sour on us, nex' time, Cap'n. Mebbe you don't fill your straight-flush; mebbe you sleepin' in the right room, this time; mebbe somebody aim his gun a little straighter. What do you say we . . ."

Calhoun apparently hadn't been listening. He was on his feet now, his face excited. "Sam," he cried, "you know anything about voodoo?"

Sam stared with wide eyes. "Voodoo?"

"Voodoo, Sam. Ever attend any of the meetings in the swamp back home? Remember the ritual, the chants, the dances—what they did?"

The whites of Sam's eyes grew wider. "Cap'n," he ventured, "mebbe I bettah look at that bandage Dr. Smith help me with. Mebbe it so tight it cuttin' off the blood from your brain. Voodoo? Voodoo ain't goin' to get us out of this. Some witch doctah's charm. Our laigs the onliest things goin' git us out of this. Our laigs carryin' us outa town befoah that woman wake up. Because she goin' to kill us, I tell you. Either she, or her cousin Yarnell—"

Sam's voice abruptly stilled. Sam paused, listening. And Calhoun had heard it, too. The sudden rising murmur of a crowd there on the street, below his window. Calhoun moved swiftly to the balcony. The low murmur of the crowd became a din. Someone on the street shouted, "There's the dirty tinhorn, now!" A rock made an arc through the air; smashed a windowpane as Calhoun leaped back. With a wry smile, Calhoun turned back to Sam.

"On the contrary, Sam," he said, "it ain't goin' to be a bullet from Edith Gowan's derringer. Nor a slug from the Colt of her loyal, avengin' kinsman. It's goin' to be a hemp rope. The whole town feels the way Joe the bartender downstairs feels. Thinks we cheated, last night. This is a lynchin', Sam!"

Sam snatched for one of Calhoun's holsters. "I'll go first, Cap'n. You follow me. There mus' be a back stairs. An' if the hotel ain't surrounded—"

Calhoun leaped after his henchman, caught Sam before Sam could open the door. He shook his head. "No, Sam, we're stayin'."

"To be—"

"To play the hand out, boy. Winnin' hand never drops, does it? Now, quick! Answer my question. What do you know about voodoo? You ain't my colored boy, Sam. You're a voodoo witch doctor that jest called on me with important information concerning . . . Listen to me! Git this straight!"

Voice mounting, words coming in a torrent, Calhoun plunged into a long speech of explanation. Outside his room, he fancied that he heard the pound of a hundred pairs of boots on the tiled lobby floor downstairs. An instant later, he was certain that he heard the pound of boots on the corridor's carpet. He finished his speech to Sam. The Negro regarded him popeyed. And whether Sam had understood everything perfectly or would be able to play the role, Calhoun didn't know. But he gambled on it—gambled his life.

He heard the mob halt outside his door. The silver blade of a fire axe crashed

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through the door's panel. And Sam, in an instant, went into his act. He tore at his shirt, ripped it from his body, stood there, ebony upper torso naked and shining in the afterglow of the sun that slanted in through the south window.

THE blade of the fire axe fell again; the door splintered, crashed. Sam let out a scream, inhuman, blood-curdling—as if suddenly he had become possessed of devils. The tom-toms might have been beating in a dank cypress swamp, the sacrificial fire burning. Voice falling from its scream to a wail of agony, Sam spun himself into the mad, dervish-like whirl of a dance.

And it might have been the black ritual of the voodoo devil worshippers, or it might have been simply Sam, faking the ritual, wailing jibberish that meant nothing at all. But it had its effect. It brought the crowd which came pouring through the portal to a tense, startled halt. There was a split-second's hush broken only by the moan of Sam's voice, the beat of his feet.

"Blood o' the black roostah," wailed Sam, "blood an' horns o' the black goat. I tell you I see . . ."

Calhoun simultaneously raised his hand in a pontifical gesture. "Silence, gentlemen," he cried in a tone, edged with superstitious awe. "Don't break the spell! He's going to name the murderer of the man in 314, last night. The real murderer!"

He scanned the crowd for a face; then he flashed his signal to Sam. Sam ceased his whirling, came to a halt, stood there trembling. The whites of his eyes rolled; foam came from his lips. Swaying, he seemed to go into a trance. "I see—I see," he cried, "I see a pokah game, las' night. One man winnin' big hands. But *anothah* man doin' the cheatin'! *Othah* man dealin' him these big hands from a stacked deck!" Feverishly Sam's voice rose lest the illusion suddenly snap and be broken. "I see the long, slendah fingahs of—a doctah? No, he ain't no doctah! He a gamblah!"

Sam spun, pointed a quivering finger in hysterical accusation. And Sam had never seen Ainsworth, of course. He knew simply from Calhoun's signal that the man was in the room. But it didn't matter. The quaking finger might have been pointed at anyone there in the crowd. And Ainsworth must have thought that the accusing finger had signaled him out.

"He a professional tinhorn, and he standin' theah—right theah, folks! Grab him! Sen' a telegram to the police in Denvah, an' you fin' out."

It happened in a flash. There in the midst of the crowd, a man whirled in panic. And next to him a second man swept for his gun. A heavy Colt cleared leather; boomed. The slug of a forty-five, fired at point-blank range, literally lifted the body of Ainsworth from the floor.

Smoking gun in his hand, Jack Yarnell stepped back. "Self-defense! Went for his gun as I tried to grab him."

There was a dead hush in the room. Dazedly, Yarnell's eyes went to the witch-doctor who, at the shot had forgotten his voodoo magic, and was standing there now at still attention.

"Ainsworth," Yarnell stammered. "Ainsworth—the voodoo man was right! See, folks! Not Gowan last night, after all. But the fake doctor, Ainsworth." With an effort Yarnell steadied his voice. "Too clever to give himself the big hands of the evening. So he gave 'em to Calhoun, instead. Concentrated all the money round the board in Calhoun's pockets. Then went to what he thought was Calhoun's room, to kill him and rob him!"

He took a step forward toward Calhoun, hand outstretched. "Sir," he cried, "I congratulate you upon—"

BUT Calhoun's hand came up, fingers clutched round the mother-of-pearl butt of an army pistol. He said softly: "And who knew from the start what the witch doctor's jest has just showed the rest of us, Yarnell? Who knew from the beginnin' that Ainsworth's hands were gambler's hands, not surgeon's hands? Who was his partner?"

The color drained from Yarnell's face

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"You knew, Yarnell. You knew when we sat down to play last night, before the game began. And I'll tell you how I know you knew. This afternoon, a woman needed the services of a doctor. You were standing at the bar, drinking with Ainsworth, when you got my message. Why didn't you bring Ainsworth up to the room? Why did you send three blocks down the street for Dr. Smith?

"The answer's obvious, Yarnell. You didn't dare bring Ainsworth. He'd have been exposed as a fraud and a mountebank. And you couldn't risk his being exposed then, any more than you could risk it now. Because you're in it, too. Up to your neck! You killed the man in 314. Sent Gowan to bed so groggy he'd fall right to sleep, then got into his room by the balcony from yours, took his gun, and—"

It was very swift. Yarnell leaped back; the heavy .45 swung in an arc. But that gun was never fired, for the lead from Calhoun's pistol caught Yarnall in the shoulder and sent him spinning back to be seized by a dozen hands.

Calhoun pocketed his pistol, walked back to the table with the unfinished julep. "There's your case, gentlemen. The motive?"

Men were lifting Yarnell to his feet. And now the agony contorted his face as his lips moved. "The motive? Robbery, like I said a minute ago. Ainsworth and I was goin' to divide the . . . Robbery, that's all. Jest robbery."

Then Yarnell had fainted.

Let it be robbery then, thought Calhoun. Keep Edith Gowan's name out of it. Only he and Yarnell knew the real motive—jealousy. He had seen Yarnell at the inquest striving to take Edith Gowan into his arms. He remembered the man's hysterical anxiety as he had come to the room with Dr. Smith. Yes, and he saw the reason for Yarnell's stirring a mob to lynch fever tonight. Yarnell, terrified lest Edith Gowan kill Calhoun and be hanged or sent to prison, had tried to get a mob to do the job before Edith Gowan could do it.

Yarnell was in love with his cousin, and always had been. He was the other man whom Gowan had left Edith free to marry. And when Travis Gowan had finally come back to claim his bride, Yarnell had followed his cousin west. And here, with Ainsworth, he had framed Gowan for murder.

But the truth, thought Calhoun, should be left untold.

"AND what made me suspect the man?" Calhoun repeated the sheriff's question hours later. He sat there looking dreamily off into space. Gone now was the black remorse which he had felt this morning. He had seen Edith Gowan reunited with her husband. He had felt the strength of Gowan's handshake, and he had read gratitude in the woman's dark eyes. And it came to him that in joining last night's game, he had averted tragedy. For it wasn't his presence which had caused murder. Murder had been planned long before his coming.

Meggs, the little drummer from Chicago, was to have been the scape-goat accused of cheating at cards, the way Yarnell had originally planned it. Gowan was to have accused Meggs; Meggs was to have been found murdered with Gowan's gun.

When Randolph Calhoun the Southerner had come along, however, Yarnell, shrewdly had altered his plan, improved upon it. The war was over, but out here in the West, Northerner and Southerner were still fighting it.

"And what made me suspect the man, sheriff?" Calhoun repeated. "Why, a million things finally, after I got to addin' 'em up. Gowan's havin' no money of his own, last night. Yarnell's bein' deliberately ready with money enough for both of them. Yarnell's bein' so quick to throw them cards out the window, lest a count of the deck show Gowan that any cheatin' must have come from the dealer, and not me. Lots of things, I reckon. But the thing that started me thinkin' was Sam. If I couldn't convince my own colored boy that I'd been playin' honest poker, then how in Hades had I convinced Yarnell and Ainsworth? And then it come to me. They

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hadn't accused me in the face o' them odds that made me look guilty, because they didn't want anybody to recall, the next day, that they'd quarreled with me, too. Gowan had to be the suspect. The one and only suspect."

For two days after that Calhoun went about with the warmth of his happiness still in him. Joe, the bartender apologized to him. The town wined and dined and feted him.

But if Calhoun was happy those next two days, Sam wasn't. "Cap'n," Sam demanded. "whyfor you give back to Mistah Gowan all that money you win in the pokah game?"

Giving back money was in Sam's eyes a folly—almost a sin. And after all the trouble Calhoun had gone to, too. Risked his neck, even. No, suh, it wasn't right, it wasn't right at all. Sam was grieved.

"Why," said Calhoun righteously, "because, as a gentleman, I couldn't keep it, could I, Sam? I'd won it—because Ainsworth was cheating—dishonestly."

Sam nodded. "But jes' the same, Cap'n, seem lahk we entitled to that money. Gettin' Gowan out of jail. Everything. Seem lahk maybe he might give us that money."

"As a tip? A gratuity, boy? Sam, you distress me. We saved Gowan's neck, out of the fullness of our forgiving heart. The war's over, boy. Out here in this new West, there's no place for old hatreds." The lips twisted in humor. "And besides, Sam, don't forget that if we hadn't managed to save Gowan by pinnin' the card-cheatin' on Ainsworth, we'd have lost our own neck. Been lynched as a griftin' tinhorn."

Sam nodded, unconvinced. "I know, Cap'n, but jes' the same it ain't lahk you to git your han's on money, an' then let it get away from us."

Sam continued to feel disappointed at the outcome of the case. And thus seven o'clock of that third morning after Yarnell's confession of guilt found Sam moping in the emptiness of his master's room as he waited for Calhoun to return from another of the banquets in his honor.

THE minute hand on the mantel clock moved round an additional half hour. Calhoun came in at last, his linen a little mussed after a night without sleep, but his dark eyes still clear and bright.

"Waitin' up for me, boy? You needn't have. But maybe it's jest as well you did. Start packin' now, and we can catch the eight o'clock local east to the junction."

"Then we leavin'?"

"Leavin', boy, before they drown us in whisky and champagne."

"Nice dinnah, then?"

"Sumptuous, Sam. Magnificent. Northerner or not, Gowan certainly knows how to entertain. Four of us could hardly drag ourselves away."

"Four of you what?"

Calhoun's voice was very soft; an amused smile flickered around his finely drawn mouth. He held up a restraining hand and continued, eyes laughing:

"The sheriff, the mayor, Travis Gowan, me. Talk turned to poker at the banquet, Sam. I remarked to Gowan, it was a shame —that other game bein' dishonest—that we hadn't had our chance to play for each other's shirts. Four of us left the rest of the guests, retired to a private room, and—"

Sam lifted his eyes, dark and intent. *"And?"*

"Why, the mayor and sheriff ended up the evenin' about even, Sam. The only real action of the evenin' was between Gowan and me. I seemed to win steadily from him all night; small, unspectacular hands. Then, came the evenin's final hand, and I held a one card draw to a straight flush in spades, Sam. Needed only the spade king to hold the same hand I'd held against Gowan in that first game."

Sam said in a whisper, "Yes, Cap'n, you need only the spade king, an' you—"

"Why," said Calhoun casually, "I filled, naturally, Sam. I drew the king. Caught me a straight flush that topped the straight flush Gowan was holdin' by a single spot."

Sam said nothing for a full long moment. He sat there, eyes wide, blinking; asked finally in a thin, still voice, "An' you 'spec me believe that?"

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"The others believed it, Sam," Calhoun said gravely. "Hadn't I demonstrated that Ainsworth was the card-cheat of that other night? I wasn't? Yes, Sam, the rest of them believed it."

"But *me*," Sam protested. "You 'spec *me* to believe it? Two such han's facin' each other on an hones' deal?"

Calhoun parried the words. "Why as for you, Sam . . ." He hesitated. Then his manner changed. He drew himself up in magnificent righteousness. "Yes, Sam, I think I expect you to believe in my honesty, too. I was dealin' that hand, to be sure. And I stacked the deck on the deal. But still, I think the result of that deal was honest enough.

"You see, Sam, Gowan didn't lose his own money, the other night. He lost money he'd borrowed from Yarnell. And the way I look at it, Gowan's under no compulsion, either legal or moral, to return that money to Yarnell. The loan was part of a fraudulent conspiracy. Legally—and as I said, morally also in this case—that makes any compulsion to repay null and void.

"So, who should profit, Sam? Gowan? Should Gowan keep the money? Or should I have it? I examined Yarnell's original intentions, Sam. Who had Yarnell intended to have the money? Why, *us*, of course. Isn't that a fact, Sam? Yarnell, in going to all the trouble to hire the tinhorn who dealt the hands that gave us that money, certainly intended that we—we, and nobody else—were to be the final recipient of that money?"

Calhoun turned away, to wash, to shave, to change to clean linen. Sam packed, trying a dozen times without success to say something. Words capable of expressing his feelings still seemed to elude Sam, as the two of them descended the grand staircase. They walked in silence to the railroad station where Calhoun stepped over to the grilled window marked *Wells-Fargo*. He took his night's winnings from his pocket and bought a Wells-Fargo money order in the sum of seventy-five hundred dollars.

The money didn't interest him now. He'd wanted it back only because—as he'd said—he felt entitled to it. And so he slipped the money order into an envelope addressed to his brother John, back home in Georgia. He stood there for a second thinking of Edith Gowan to whom he had brought happiness— And of Lucy Page. Then he sealed the envelope and handed it back to the express clerk. To go east to John: funds sufficient for an anonymous donor to endow a hospital bed in the name of his Lucy.

His dark eyes narrowed for a moment, glowing with light that came from within. A strange, indescribable peace rested on him, as if a woman beloved had brushed her lips reassuringly against his mouth. He touched it gently—very gently—with just the tips of his fingers. It had been a sort of secret farewell. He was appeased at last.

Sam hadn't seen the gesture. Nor would Calhoun spoil Sam's elation by telling the boy that he had kept the money only long enough to get rid of it. He walked back to where Sam was waiting for him.

And now Sam managed to ask the question which he had been endeavoring to ask. "But, Cap'n, if you figger it out, that money honestly ours, why don' you 'splain it that way to Mistah Gowan in the beginnin'?"

Calhoun sighed. "You distress me, Sam. Quibble over the money with an ill-bred Northerner? Ask for it as if I greedily wanted it? As a gentleman, I had only one recourse to that money. The only honorable way I could keep it was to return it to Gowan, and then, in an honest game win it back from him."

The morning local which was to carry them out of Pine Mesa was just pulling in. Sam regarded Calhoun with worshipful yet twinkling eyes.

"Cap'n," he declared, "when the res' o' the worl' learn as much about makin' honesty pay as you know, then the preachers all goin' to be out of a job, on account of they ain't no sinnahs lef' to be dishones'."

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Randolph couldn't see the thing that had him by the neck. Randolph couldn't breathe

Steamboat Gold

By GEORGE W. OGDEN

JONATHAN RANDOLPH, young mining engineer, could not have guessed what a fantastic adventure lay ahead when he set out to recover the gold that went down fifty years before with the *Morning Star.*

Randolph believes that only he and his father, who had been captain of the river steamer on her fatal trip, knew of the hundred thousand dollars in gold that had been locked up in her safe. But when he arrives in New Bend he learns from Moss Gregg, his father's old pilot, that four other men have come looking for the *Star,* ostensibly seeking the cargo of whisky that she carried. Jonathan wonders if they could somehow have known about the gold. Three of them disappeared and were never heard of again; the fourth was found on the river road, his body hideously mangled.

From the start, Jonathan senses a strange foreboding of evil. The natives of the Narris seem reluctant to have anything to do with the project. There are strange stories whispered; the very river seems to regard him with enmity.

IT is necessary to get the permission of Caleb Moore before he can begin to dig; for the river has changed its course and Moore's cornfields now grow over the silt and quicksand where the *Star* lies buried. Juliet, the old man's granddaughter, wins his consent; but it is obvious that Moore is frightened. "Someone—something—" he mutters, "has been watching her old bones for fifty years. Something terrible that doesn't want her touched."

Through Gregg, Randolph meets the other folk of the Narris. There is Mystery, Gregg's daughter, loved by Atchison, the erratic schoolteacher; there is Arkansaw, Gregg's son, who tells Jonathan of the "snapping ghost"—the weird monster, half wolf, half

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man, that haunts the river road after dark, and who, Arkansaw insists, once attacked him at night; there is Joel Langworthy, the attorney, one half of whose face is compellingly beautiful while the other is repulsively malformed.

Atchison describes Langworthy as a "wolf." And Joel remembers what he has heard about the "snapping ghosts" and the mangled body of the fourth man who had looked for the old steamer. Langworthy, he learns, has the gift of "whispering"—he has broken unruly horses and healed sick cattle merely by whispering in their ears.

MYSTERY GREGG is plainly fascinated by him; and Atchison is helplessly jealous. Juliet Moore is drawn to Langworthy in spite of herself, and she confesses to Randolph, who is more than half in love with her himself, that she is afraid Langworthy will "whisper" to her, even though she has never heard about Langworthy's strange gift.

Meanwhile the work of sounding goes on, with Moore getting more frightened. "They will come soon," he mutters. Even the announcement that the steamboating will be resumed on the river does not comfort him.

Jonathan goes to live in Moore's deserted old store. One night while he is at supper at the Moores' house, the old man leaps up from the table, eyes staring with fright, and hurls a cup through the window. "Watch close," he says. "Watch close, Jonathan, lest they come for you—and kill you! . . ."

CHAPTER XV

GREGG FORECASTS A MIRACLE

RANDOLPH had seen nothing in that moment his eyes had searched the window. As the glass crashed through the pane and rebounded into the room from the wire screen Juliet sprang to the old man's side with a pitiful low cry as if he had struck her.

Randolph, his senses blurred in the confused, quick action of that unexpected event, was on his feet, reaching out to support the old man, who was tottering as if to fall.

Moore sank back to his chair, his chest heaving, his face bloodless. His eyes were staring, and vacant of every expression but absolute fright; he breathed in gasps through his open mouth. Juliet clung to him, soothing him in meaningless little words, rubbing his hands, which lay still half shut and rigid on the cloth as if some frightful thing that he had clutched in his terrible imagining had torn from his grasp and fled.

He said nothing, offered no explanation of his remarkable conduct. But presently he mastered his terror and took Juliet by the hand, stroked it with trembling fingers, shook his head as if in depreciation of the scene.

Randolph looked questioningly at Juliet, who met his eyes for an instant, shook her head, and turned again to her ministrations over the old man. There was again that pitiful appeal in her eyes, which seemed to Randolph to shut the door to any explanation, except such as he was in reason bound to place on the extraordinary occurrence himself.

Caleb Moore was insane. That was the only answer to his phantom-seeing fits. That Moore himself realized this was most certain, for he bent his head as if ashamed of the affliction which overmastered him in wild moments such as that, and murmured to Juliet:

"It will pass, it will pass!"

Soothingly he spoke, as if to calm her fears for him, as of a thing understood between them, and dreaded as the arm of death.

Presently he lifted his face to Randolph, who stood still indecisive beside the table and looked him unflinchingly in the eyes.

"I owe you an explanation for this display of passion, Mr. Randolph," he said, "and in the right time it will be given to you. Tonight, sir, I only ask you to have the charity to overlook an old man's weakness and consider, sir that only the greatest provocation, the greatest provocation—"

His words seemed to wander from him there; a transitory spasm of fear or rage distorted his noble features again, passing in a moment.

"You owe me nothing, sir," said Randolph, moved by a strong pity for this rugged old man, breaking like a splendid

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ship upon the rocks. "Let me help you to your bed."

Gratefully the old man grasped Randolph's proffered hand and rose unsteadily from his chair. A moment he stood trembling, then he gathered himself and seemed to shake his weakness from him by a marshaling of his will. Rhody had come at the old man's cry and the crash of the breaking pane. Now she stood near the door farthest away from the damaged window, which Moore was approaching, groaning, waving her hands, her homely face set in an expression of the deepest terror. She stared at the window, seeing nothing besides; she was trembling like a beaten dog.

Juliet offered the old man the support of her strong young body, which he seemed no longer to require. He stroked her hair as they went on, and petted her, trying bravely to drive the pain out of her eyes, and spoke comfortingly, assuring her that it was over and done and would occur no more.

In the hall Moore stopped abruptly.

"My glasses, child—I must have dropped them at the table—will you fetch them?" he said.

As she left them, Moore leaned and whispered to Randolph:

"Watch close, watch close, every minute of your life, sleeping, and waking, watch! Work fast—day and night—there is not an hour to lose!"

Juliet came back with the spectacles. In her eyes there was the knowledge that something had passed between them while she was away. She seemed to be jealous of a confidence between them that she could not share; her reproachful glance told Randolph that.

It was something that he had no desire to hold concealed. Indeed, he would have welcomed the chance to share the old man's warning with her and take counsel on the meaning of it. It was as much a mystery to him as the past events which hung still unsolved, a cloud over the wreck of the Narris, a curse over that house which shook reason in the aged and wrote with the strokes of terror in the eyes of youth.

Moore seemed to read this desire in the thought of his guest. He gave them no opportunity for a word apart, even hastened Randolph's departure by giving him goodnight as they stood midway of the great hall leading to the outer door.

THERE was no moon, but the darkness was almost palpable as Randolph left the mansion to seek his lonely tent. Blacker than the night were the thoughts that he carried with him as he passed through the field, where the wind prowled and shook the long blades of corn, whetting them like the swords of a blood-hungry army waiting in impatient ambuscade.

What was the meaning of this warning that Caleb Moore had given him? Why had the old man urged him to push the work on the wreck day and night, as if certain of some threatening power hovering to intervene?

Randolph turned this whispered warning over and looked at it from all angles for a crevice to insert his groping key. His first and last conclusion was that Moore had uttered a warning against himself. The old man realized that his mind must soon flare up into raging and drive him to violent deeds.

Twice within a few weeks Moore's malady had broken its curbing limits and surged over him like a destructive wave in Randolph's presence. He wondered what secrets Juliet kept, indexed by her fearful eyes.

Caleb Moore was insane. He had been intermittently insane all those years. The mysteries of the Narris, the dark warnings, the disappearance of those who had come to seek the wreck; all the violence and dark deeds, in the end, must come back to the old man's frenzy. This Randolph believed entirely unwilling as he was to admit the conviction. Out of the regard that Moore felt for him, a stranger who had won to his iron heart, he had spoken this warning, feeling himself to be upon

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the brink, facing his last plunge into hopeless insanity.

Clouds were banking in the south, seeming to compress the heat of the night ahead of them. Lightning pictured their peaks and shadowed valleys, still so far distant than the thunder could not be heard. Yet the force of the coming storm lowered through the night.

Randolph considered shaping his future course according to Moore's warning to guard himself constantly. The warning could not have stood without a foundation; too well that gray old man knew the nature of the danger that stood off waiting its hour, like the silent storm on the far horizon.

Randolph's tent was pitched near the site of his explorations, on the high ground of the old bank, its walls tucked up to let in the wind. He stood considering whether to sleep there or make himself a bed in the field among the rows of corn.

Caution urged the latter course, but the threat of the storm turned him at last to the tent. It was unlikely, he believed, that anything would shape so soon to trouble his safety. Tomorrow night he would sleep in the open, and each night thereafter in a new place, like a cautious creature of the brakes. He was too tired, hot and dispirited that hour to run away from danger, especially a danger without form.

He put his powerful flashlight under his pillow, and laid his revolver under his cot where he could drop his hand to it on the first alarm. But he would not resort to the weapon except to preserve his own life. His first endeavor would be, if anything threatened him, to find out the nature of it. One thing or person only he would flee from—Caleb Moore himself.

IT WAS the vanguard of the rain running over his tent, great drops like drumming finger-ends that woke him. A cool wind was coming under the tent wall, sweet with the soothing scents of night. Beyond Skillet Lake he could hear the soft roar of the rain curtain as it came trailing across the fields.

There was assurance in the calm that spread out ahead of the rain. There would be no wind to wrench tent pegs, no getting up to haul and brace and make fast. But there was a feeling of oppression in his breathing, a leaping of the pulse, a straining of the senses in wild unreasoning confusion against the soft whispering of the night that all was well.

He had the feeling that there was somebody else in the tent, although he had heard neither footsteps nor rustling to betray the presence of any living thing.

The rain came crashing into the thirsty corn. He listened, straining, his breath held, hesitating between revolver and light, moving to neither. In the concentration of his faculties to hear and feel out that suspected intruder he seemed to have no force left to direct the action of his hands.

This qualm passed in a breath, seeming to sweep upward through his body like a cold electric wave and die out of him in his hair, which had the sensation at its roots of settling down. He lifted to his elbow and fumbled under his pillow for the light.

With his movement there was a soft rush toward him like some quick-footed creature that had gathered itself, waiting; a whining sharp cry, as of a wild beast surprised.

It came so suddenly and with such strength that Randolph was borne down again on his cot, which collapsed under the strain, and tumbled them in added confusion to the ground.

In a moment Randolph was on his knees, struggling for his life, for his assailant had a hand at his throat, a grip in his fingers that made the flesh ache. A man, nothing more terrible—or less—arms and shoulders bare, muscles as hard as leather; a man, reasonless it seemed, and fiercely wild, driven by some mad passion that made him whine and snap like a dog.

Randolph was overmatched, for his assailant was a larger man, and the ad-

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vantage had been with him from the beginning. If the marauder had been armed with club or stone he must have triumphed almost immediately, but he seemed to have only a wolf's desire.

A moment of blank desperation, a turmoil of struggle. Randolph fought to his feet, knee to knee, breast to breast with the unreasoning creature, shaking off the hold it had on his throat.

With breath came confidence, furious resentment. For a little while the sane man was as much a beast in his wild desire to feel hot blood on his hands as that night-prowling terror of the Narris woods.

They fought on equal terms now, for Randolph was dressed only in the trousers of his pajamas. Except that the mad creature of the woods did not strike like a man. He tore at Randolph's flesh with his long, hard fingers, and leaped like a leopard to lay him by the throat.

In the struggle the foot of one of them fell on the electric flash-light, pressing the contact, suddenly illuminating the tent like a lightning stroke.

At the first gleam of the light the naked man sprang back with that same sharp, surprised cry. When Randolph flashed the light round the tent a moment later, revolver in hand, the creature was gone.

Outside he heard for a moment the sound of fleet bare feet, but when he followed as quickly as he could there was no sound but the rain.

STANDING there in the silence, the peace of the rain-soothed night around him, Randolph might have persuaded himself that he had sprung up out of a dream but for a throbbing sharp pain in his left wrist. When he bore the light on it he saw blood, and looking closer the marks of teeth. The flesh was torn in one place, the skin punctured around the wound, but the injury was slight, aside from complications which might arise.

At that moment, and not before, the story told him by Arkansaw of the snapping ghost that he had struggled with in the woods near the lake recurred to him. Arkansaw had been modest in his words and calm in his emotions, considering the terror that such an encounter must have set over him.

The snapping ghost was a reality, in everything but substance. Here was matter, living, and unreasoning except in the primitive sense of self-preservation such as the lowest living creature enjoys. The creature had fled at the first gleam of light, as a wolf would have gone from the tent. He had but glimpsed it in that flash—tall, muscular man-form with hairy chest, one bent arm thrown quickly before his face as if it feared the light like some deadly thing. It had gone like the wind.

Randolph applied an antiseptic to his slight wound and bound it up, determined to keep it hidden, as well as the unbelievable manner in which he had come by it. It was a thing better not known until an explanation of it, at least, could be offered with the disclosure of the strange visit and wild assault.

He was sick in the revulsion that followed his shock of surprise and fright—for he had been frightened when he woke, and his fright had multiplied when he grappled with that snarling, whining, naked man. The loathsome appetite that set the poor bestial creature roaming the night was hard to reconcile with the desire of any human being.

Yet the creature had borne a human form, as surely as its teeth had left their imprint in his flesh.

There was no more sleep for him that night. He stretched on his cot in the dark and listened to the rain blend out like some sweet overture, dropping down to a whisper on the canvas, ceasing after a while, leaving the night more lonely for its going. There was a mournful drip from his taut canvas and the long corn blades, and at last the dawn widened out of the somber melancholy, with a clear sky growing from an eastward rift.

The phantoms of his night dimmed away as he kindled his fire, for daylight

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inspires a brighter courage. Only the thought of Mystery Gregg and her solemn appeal to him to abandon his search and go away, persisted when other vexing questions in that unsolved tangle had withdrawn.

Mystery had known of this impending danger; her appeal had not been based on the accumulation of old tales and superstitions. How had she known it? Why was this honest-eyed, open-souled woman an initiate into the dangerous gross mysteries which strong men could not penetrate?

It was beyond answering, except that this seemed impossible of having any point of contact with Caleb Moore. What it was that Mystery Gregg knew; what it might be that Hugh Atchison waited for and cast dark hints toward; the thing that wrote terror in virginal eyes—all this must come out to the healthy light of day before his work would be finished there.

CHAPTER XVII

NOT EVEN MURDER

JOEL LANGWORTHY rode over that morning, as he often did when setting out on a stock-buying expedition. He loped over in his big Mexican saddle, one thigh across the seat, and talked with his usual volubility and keen way of getting down to what he wanted to know. Joel was curious this morning to learn whether they had come across any of the plates in the steamer's dining room.

"It's been said ever since I can remember that the sugar bowls, cream pitchers and spoons alone had silver enough in them to make a man independent," Joel said. "The old-timers who remembered it have told me that it was the finest silver-set on the two rivers. The boat was the special pet of the company, it seems."

"I hope it will prove up to the specifications of tradition, all around," Randolph told him; "but up to this time we haven't uncovered even a pewter spoon."

Joel never was in a hurry. He met life with the composure of a man to whom things came as he ordered them, slowly in some instances, perhaps, but undoubted of their final arrival. So he lounged there in the hot sun on his horse, watching the earth as they hauled it from the well and poured it on the dump, as if he hoped to see a bit of treasure before he left. When he rode away to go about his cattle-buying at last, Hugh stood inactive at the windlass, his big hands clasping the crank, heedless of Arkansaw's shouted instructions to hoist away. He was gazing after Joel as the corn swallowed him, a look of sternness in his face such as Randolph never had seen there before.

Randolph heaved on the crank and Hugh bent to his labor, his face still darkened by the bitterness of the thought that had gone out after Joel Langworthy.

"Joel appears to stand the heat like a rattlesnake," said Randolph.

"He belongs to the genus said to be impervious to fire," said Hugh.

"Salamander?"

Hugh turned his slow eyes toward Randolph as if measuring the depth of his sincerity. What he read in the young man's face must have satisfied him, for he nodded very solemnly. "Salamander," he said.

"But what is there about the man that throws a cloud into a woman's eyes when she looks at him?"

"You have seen it, then?"

"In two cases, where the subjects were as far apart in temperament as such variation in women is to be expected."

Hugh did not reply immediately. They hauled up another tub of earth, emptied it, swung the vessel over the well's mouth.

"He is the devil's own," said Hugh. More composed in a little while, he continued: "I suppose you know he wants to marry Juliet Moore?"

"So I have heard."

"All of this little streak of the world knows she doesn't want him, but that makes little difference to Langworthy. His past history in the Narris shows that a woman's inclination has little to do with balking him in his desires."

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"You mean he'll marry her anyhow, in his own time?"

"That's about it, John."

Randolph laughed, untroubled by the prospect.

"He'll just about as soon marry Mystery Gregg," he said, meaning to give Hugh a little prod in a tender place just to see how he would carry it.

"He doesn't want to marry Mystery," said Hugh, sententiously. "There are other wrecks in the Narris besides the *Morning Star,* but there shall be no more, not if I have to do murder."

RANDOLPH felt the blood sink out of of his face. Hugh's earnestness was a thing too deep for trifling, the matter under discussion not one on which to base friendly banter.

"I'm sorry I said that, Hugh," he said.

"You can understand it better now why I've stayed on here," said Hugh, passing over the apology, no offense in his frank eyes, "and why I hasten back when I go away. He is a bad man, from core to rind he's bad. I've guarded her against him, I've labored with the fixed love of my soul her from his hand. I believe the little influence that I have in her life has been her salvation until now. How long it will last, I do not know, but I hope it may be long enough—long enough."

"Unless she's blind to virtue and deaf to love, it will endure all her days," said Randolph, with the deepest respect and sympathy. "When he isn't around she's fond of you, Hugh; I can see it in her many little acts."

"Yes, she's a changed woman when he appears."

Randolph was thinking of Langworthy skulking away from the kitchen door through the corn on his first evening at Moss Gregg's house. With this troubling him as it never had troubled him before, he spoke.

"When you're away, Hugh, I suppose he hangs around here to full content."

"In the peril of his life he'd do it! He knows it—he knows it very well."

That stealthy visit to the kitchen door, his team hitched in some sequestered wayside thicket, his way hidden through the corn, was explained. Joel Langworthy was afraid of the serious and silent schoolmaster, as iniquity fears justice to the world's farthest rim.

And in his own time and way Joel Langworthy was expected to marry Juliet Moore. Hugh had said it with the certainty of a thing fixed by fate.

It was not hard to believe that a woman's will had little force against the strength of that man whom the handicap of nature and the many defeats that he had met could not turn aside for one hour from the purpose of his life. He shuddered for Juliet Moore, remembering many things.

The old man had spoken of the reward that Joel should have in the way of a man who had fixed his mind on the most precious thing he had to give. What beside Juliet? Juliet, young, fresh, clean as a sacrificial dove; Juliet was to be the reward. With the pressure of her grandfather's desire behind her she would go at last to the bosom of that faun-faced man, and shudder and die in the chill of his cold soul.

Joel Langworthy passed back at the noon hour, and paused long enough to tell them that he had read in the paper, just arrived on that morning's mail, that there was a big rise coming down the river.

"This time of the year!" said Arkansaw, with the Narris distrust of papers.

"Due to reach Kansas City today, it says," Joel declared. He went on, the paper that contained the remarkable news in his hand.

"Oh, shucks!" said Arkansaw. "Joel he's got hold of one of last spring's papers."

"Never come a rise this time of the year to amount to anything in my time," said Gregg, "and I'd bet any man seven dollars it never will."

"I saw something in yesterday's paper about the river being high at Omaha, on account of the heaviest rains in years in the mountains," said Hugh.

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"How high was it?" Gregg inquired, challengingly.

"I don't remember what it said."

"Two or three inches, maybe," Gregg said. "That'd be unusual enough to put it in the paper, this time of the year."

"It might come up, though," said Arkansaw.

"It would be funny if it was to rise out of season, just like old man Moore said it would come up when the boats got back," Gregg commented, in thoughtful seriousness. "It'd be a joke on the natives if it was to rare up and claw back into the Narris, wouldn't it?

THIS phase of possibility seemed to excite the old man. He got up and looked around him, as if consulting the signs of the weather, his beard pointing to the horizon as he tilted his head back to sniff the wind.

To Randolph the news was even more moving than it had been to Gregg, although he said little and kept his feelings covered. Was it possible that the fulfillment of the old man's prophecy was at hand? Or was this but a flurry in the tide of the river that would waste in its dry sands before reaching the scar of its old highway?

"I'm goin' to take a dash up to the river and see," Arkansaw announced. "If it got to Kansas City this morning it'd be showin' along here by now. But I don't believe it. I've never seen a rise in August in my dern mortal days, and I ain't been out of sight of the river all my life."

"It might happen," said Gregg; "it's just as reasonable to expect a flood in August as it is to think the river'll miss it in June some year. I've been figgerin' it'd do that a long time, plantin' corn down there on the edge of the slough."

"Well, it never missed," Arkansaw reminded him.

"Not yet," sighed Gregg.

The wonder of it was heavy on Captain Gregg, for he had been a scoffer at the prophecies of Caleb Moore.

"It don't say because the boats have begun to run the Missouri again that they're here to stay," said the old man, as if to justify himself for his past contention. "But I tell you; it makes a feller kind o' look around to see what give him the creeps up his back when he sees the old man's word comin' true all through."

"It was nothing but the expression of sound judgment," said Hugh. "The history of transportation all over the civilized globe was there for him to base his prediction on. It was only logical that the elimination of competition in rates between them by the railroads would bring the boats back to the river."

"But there wasn't only one little streak of a railroad startin' up the river from Jefferson City in them days, Hugh—the time old man Moore made that there prophecy."

"He knew there would be others, he foresaw conditions as they are today. It didn't require much vision in a man to see that, there was nothing miraculous about it. You could have predicted that."

"Well, I never," said the old man. "It looks like a marycle to me."

Arkansaw was not gone long, considering the distance. He broke out of the corn with burrs on his legs and morning-glory vines clogged round his ankles, showing that he had set a bee-line for his return and had held true upon it, turning aside for nothing.

"She's risin'," he panted, his eyes big. "Chunk drift's a floatin'—she'll be five feet higher by morning."

"It beats me," said the old man, rising to look toward the river, where the tree-tops at the head of the Narris could be seen.

"It'll never come high enough to climb back into the Narris, though," said Arkansaw. "It never done it yet, and it never will."

"Chunk wood!" said the old man, marveling at this sign of coming high water. "Any yeller foam?"

"Scads of it," said Arkansaw.

Captain Gregg buckled up his right suspender; reached across with fixed eyes

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staring away up the river, and trussed up the left. He took a chew of tobacco from his nibbled twist; he worked it well into the mill of his two teeth and chopped it to bits.

"Gentlemen," said he, looking about him like a man who sees a storm under the gentle face of an approaching cloud, "I'll bet you forty dollars it's a marycle!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SWALLOWED BY THE NIGHT

"LEFT no word, you say, and seems to have been gone all night? Strange, for a man like Randolph, very strange."

"His cot's spread up as if he hadn't slept on it. I thought perhaps he'd spent the night here, or had been taken sick and come up for help."

There was anxiety in Hugh Atchison's manner. He stood in the morning sun before Moore's steps, his head bare, smoothing back his hair from his forehead with quick, hard strokes. His hand trembled a little, and that old strained look of whistling was drawn into his features.

Jonathan Randolph was missing from his camp. When the force from Gregg's arrived at the usual hour they found his bed untroubled, his camp deserted. Calling and searching had failed to discover him. No written word from him in explanation of his absence could be found.

"No-o, he hasn't been here, he didn't come up last night as he usually does. He must have got up early and gone looking around somewhere. He'll turn up after a while."

"We've looked around down there pretty well, but he isn't within a mile of camp and I'm certain from the look of things he didn't stay there last night. If he'd gone anywhere he'd have left word."

"It would look that way," said the old man, trouble darkening over his face. "You found no trace of a—of violence, or struggle?"

"Everything is undisturbed. It looks like he'd just walked away, intending to come back in a little while."

"He must be around there somewhere, maybe some accident has happened to him; I'll get my hat and go down with you."

Juliet appeared in the door.

When she saw the schoolmaster she came out, quickening from the melancholy that had fallen over her and hung like smoke in a cool valley since she had turned sighing from her fruitless watch at the gate for Randolph last night. She came forward quickly, with eyes turning from one face to the other in frightened inquiry.

"What's the matter, *grandpère?* What has happened? Has somebody been hurt, Mr. Atchison?"

Hugh passed the explanation to Moore with a brief glance, and turned his head away.

"Not exactly hurt," said Moore. He caught himself quickly, as if reaching back to recall the words, which had struck a whiteness to Juliet's cheek as if she had been given a blow with the open hand. "No, nothing has happened, child—there is no occasion for fright or worry."

"I thought Mr. Atchison had come—I saw something in his face when he looked at you," said Juliet, speaking rapidly, her eyes eloquent of her fear.

"Will you run in for my hat, child?"

"What is it, *grandpère?*" she asked, her hand on his arm, looking up earnestly into his face. "Has something happened to Mr. Randolph?"

Hugh turned to her, not having it in his heart to keep her in suspense over an incident which might be as simple as clear water the next hour, or as grave as death before the close of day. Moore saw what was in the master's face and lifted his hand to check him.

"Mr. Randolph has gone somewhere and left no word behind him," Moore explained, his hand on the girl's shoulder, his voice cheerful and depreciatory of her concern; "he—"

"Gone! When? How long?" She turned to Hugh, her face cold and white, her hands clenched, her breath drawn deep as

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if she braced herself to bear a pain.

"I think he went away early in the evening—"

"He will be back, it will be all right," said the old man, a little impatiently. "Fetch me my hat, child—I'll help them look around. He must have left a note which has been blown away."

Juliet did not stir. She stood looking from one to the other.

"He'll never come back!" she said.

"Why, child—"

"Others have gone that way," shaking her head sadly, "and none of them ever came back again. He is dead! I felt last night that he was dead—I was so troubled I couldn't sleep."

ARKANSAW was coming, leaning forward as if walking against the wind, taking the ground five feet at a step. He had something white in his hand, but it was not much whiter than his face. Moore turned to him, went a little way to meet him, holding out his hand to receive what Arkansaw was bringing, in the belief, evidently, that it was a message from the missing man.

Arkansaw unfolded the strip of white cloth that he was holding in his hand, and drew it across his palm like a salesman showing a ribbon. In a certain place there were several spots of blood, in a semicircle. To these Arkansaw pointed, with fearful countenance.

"Well, well! what is the meaning of all this mummery?" demanded Moore.

"You know his arm was hurt yesterday," Arkansaw nodded to Hugh; "said he hurt it on the saw. Does them look like the marks of saw-teeth?"

Moore leaned to look at the stains, drew back, his countenance distorted, his eyes staring. He trembled, his face grew white. Juliet caught his hand and clung to him, and under the assurance of her warm touch the spasm of horror seemed to pass as quickly as it had come. Not so quickly that the schoolmaster had not seen it and marveled; nor that Arkansaw, excited as he was, had not wondered.

"What's that got to do with it, Arkansaw?" Hugh demanded.

"This is the rag he had tied on his arm," said Arkansaw, "and them marks is the marks of teeth—not saw-teeth, but bitin' teeth. He's had a fight with the snappin' ghost and it come back last night and took him!"

"Have you found any trace of him around the camp?" Moore asked, his voice husky and unsteady.

"Not a hide nor hair of him! He's gone, I tell you folks—he's went the same way them other fellers went."

Hugh had taken the stained cloth from Arkansaw and put it in his pocket, in the thought that the sight of blood on it had moved Moore with that betrayal of fear, knowing that some people are subject to such qualms. Juliet had not spoken since her grandfather had shrunk back from Arkansaw's evidence, but now she said, appealing to Arkansaw:

"I don't think you ought to spread a story like that around—it would bring crowds of curious people here, and make it that much harder for us to trace Mr. Randolph, if he is gone."

"No, we don't want any of your wild ghost stories circulating around and drawing a pack of fools here with their tongues hanging out," said the old man with some heat. "Randolph will come back when he's ready—he's just gone to Richfield to send a telegram, or on some errand."

"The old man's goin' after the sheriff," said Arkansaw.

"Stop him!" said Moore, speaking to Hugh. "This is not a matter for the sheriff, we don't want any nosing around here. Give the boy time to come back, don't go making a flurry over nothing."

"No, no—we don't want the sheriff," protested Juliet. "Don't mind what I said a little while ago, Mr. Atchison—I was excited and hasty. I'm sure"—to Arkansaw—"that Mr. Randolph's gone to Richfield for something. He'll be back in a little while, by noon, I think. He wouldn't like it if you were to go telling a wild, silly story like that around, or your father

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went for the sheriff. Please run and stop him, Arkansaw."

Arkansaw was unwilling to surrender a theory that had so much comfortable horror in it for him. He shook his head in sad denial of her attempt to put a reasonable explanation to Randolph's disappearance.

"I WISH he was gone to Richfield, or some place we know of, Julie," he said. "He made a mistake stayin' around there alone after fightin' the snappin' ghost. It slipped up on him, the way it tried to slip up on me the time I rasseled and fit it over yonder in them woods."

"Stop Gregg before he goes on that fool errand for the sheriff, and tell him to keep his mouth shut about this till we're sure there's something to talk about," Moore ordered, speaking sharply to Hugh again.

"I'll head him off around the bend and send him back," Arkansaw offered.

"Tell him to be careful what he says," Hugh cautioned. "It's more than likely John will be back before noon, and we don't want to make a fool of him or be made fools of, I guess, do we Arkansaw?"

"I'll tell him," Arkansaw promised, hurrying off to intercept his father at the bend.

Contrary to Moore's expressed expectations, Randolph did not return that day. Moore and Juliet had joined the others in searching for some trace that would give an explanation of the treasure-hunter's disappearance. It was an empty day, and it came to its close with a darkening of the cloud, which seemed to have dropped nearer to the rooftree of the gray house on the hillside.

The schoolmaster had seen Juliet go back to the house under the shadow of this new sorrow which had made her eyes look old. All afternoon she had waited in the shade of Randolph's tent, silent and expectant; listening for him to come rustling through the corn, or striking down the road with his soldierly tread.

It wrung the schoolmaster's heart to see that pain in her young face. When he told her that he would mount guard at the camp all night, and carry the first word to her, the look that she gave him was better than any praise of his valor or thankfulness for his fidelity to a friend that could have uttered.

When Moss Gregg hitched up to drive home, he stood with his foot on the hub of his front wheel and protested against this watch at the camp. Arkansaw joined him, with fear in his voice and wild casting around into the shadows lengthening from bush and field, in urging the schoolmaster to go home with them and let the ghosts of that fateful place after their own.

"Other men have come like him, and went like him," said Gregg, "and I felt from the start he'd never live to make a hole down to that old hull. I done my best to turn him from it, and I held out till the fire of damnation and hell got into me from hearin' about that money. If I never 'd 'a' hitched up with him I don't reckon he'd 'a' went ahead. I'll feel to my last day I've had a kind of hand in his death, for he's a dead man, Hugh—he's as dead as the thief on the cross."

"I'll stay," said Hugh.

"Well, I'm done with it, for my part—"

"Here, too!" said Arkansaw.

"I ain't got many more years to live," Gregg went on, "and when I go I want to go like a good old Methodist orto go, stretched out on m' bed with m' britches off. The warnin'-bell's struck for us fellers that's been meddlin' in this trouble with him, Hugh; let it go before it pulls you down with it. I'm turnin' my back on this hell's graveyard this evenin', never to set foot in it agin."

"I'm going to stay," said Hugh.

"Well, I wash my hands of the whole thing," Gregg said, throwing out his hands as if jerking water from them. "If we hide this thing, and try to cover it up, we'll be blamed for it, likely, when the sheriff comes in at the end. I've held my peace as long as I'm aimin' to, 'count of old man Moore. I'm a goin' to talk, and talk loud,

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and start the sheriff over here to see if he can scare up any track of that boy."

"I don't suppose it makes any difference who knows he's gone," said Hugh.

"It orto be knowed, and it orto be knowed right now," Arkansaw insisted. "I don't want to have no grand jury summonsin' me up and hintin' around I had a hand in it, 'y gunnies!"

"That's just about what they'll be doin', Hugh, they'll be throwin' their lead right and left, and the man that keeps still and carries this thing around with him he's the man that'll ketch the blame. I'm goin' to talk, I'm goin' to tell all I know."

THE old man appeared to feel that he had been put upon by Moore all day, and laid under a command of silence which was a taint upon his honor and safety. He buckled up and let down, buckled up and let down, and chewed his tobacco like a hungry calf at the teat.

"Perhaps it's just as well," Hugh granted.

"It's better, it's a hanged sight better, I tell y', Hugh. Keepin' still ain't goin' to fetch that boy back, and it ain't goin' to help me and you and Moore to slip up on them that took him away underhanded in the dark."

"Don't you reckon the snappin' ghost done it, Hugh?" Arkansaw asked.

"No, Arkansaw; there isn't any snapping ghost."

It was the first time that Hugh ever had expressed himself on that question, although he had heard Arkansaw's story many a time. Now father and son looked at him with the shocked surprise of devotees who had heard a denial of faith by a brother.

"Say, man, I rasseled it, right over in them woods!" Arkansaw protested.

"It tried to bite him—shucks! You've heard him tell it a hundred times, Hugh."

"I had m' hands on it, Hugh—I socked it in the ribs with m' fist!"

"You can't lay hands on a ghost, or hit it in the ribs, Arkansaw," said Hugh.

"Who said you couldn't?" Arkansaw asked with the surety of one whose authority is not to be denied.

"You can't lay hands on imagination. You fought something over there in the woods, I believe that just as well as you do, Arkansaw. But it wasn't a ghost."

Arkansaw was on one side of the wagon, his foot on the hub, hands on the seat, ready to climb in; his father stood similarly poised for the upward lift on the other.

Arkansaw roamed his eyes around the little cleared space in the corn, where the work was being done, and farther over to the margin of the field and the dark fringe of trees and brush along the shore of Skillet Lake, where his forest of dread memories began.

"If it wasn't a ghost, it was a devil!" he said.

"It's been seen by plenty of other folks, Hugh, if you don't want to take Arkansaw's word," said Gregg, a little sad over this late discovery of Hugh's treasonable belief.

"What'll you do if it busts out of the brush along in the night and tackes you?" Arkansaw asked, hitching himself on his ground leg a little closer to the wagon.

"Yes, you ain't got no gun," Gregg said. He lifted himself a little, like a swimmer at a float trying the buoyancy of his body, making sure that he was set for a quick scramble into the wagon in case the dreadful specter should break all ghost conventions and make a dash for him out of the corn.

"It will be welcome," said Hugh, still unmoved.

"It's got breath as hot as a lime-kiln!" said Arkansaw.

Plainly both father and son were battering themselves up to a state of skin-creeping fear. They looked around the valley, where everything drooped and hung limp after the day's battle with the sun, with senses tuned to the highest imaginative strain.

It was very still there. No wind was moving, not a chirp of bird or insect wounded. All life was panting in this first respite of the hard-wearing day.

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"I WOULDN'T be in your shoes tonight for a thousand dollars!" said Gregg, a shiver running over him. He lifted himself again in that little muscle-trying pull, this time keeping only the toe of his shoe on the ground.

"Not for double it!" said Arkansaw emphatically.

Gregg looked across at his son, his head turned a little, as if he had heard something moving, and listened sharply for the sound of it again.

Arkansaw caught his breath, the color sinking away from his brown cheeks, and stood with mouth open, like a man stretching every faculty of caution that nature had given him.

With sudden accord both of them heaved themselves up to the seat. Gregg threw off the brake with such sudden release that a little cloud of dust rose out of the bones of his old wagon.

Arkansaw leaned over and lashed the drowsing horse into sudden activity.

The wagon went bouncing over the furrows, its end-gate jumping in the grooves. A little way along Arkansaw looked back; then Gregg. They looked as if Hugh's determination to stand watch there all night had placed him beyond nature. With every turn of their wheels their self-kindled fear increased.

Arkansaw "put the bud" to the team with unreasonable vigor—every blow of the long hickory gad across their ribs came sharply back to Hugh where he stood watching their undignified flight from terrors which they had raised by words.

The team was on the gallop the last he saw of them, and Gregg was leaning over the dashboard, pushing on the lines.

CHAPTER XIX

THE RIVER THREATENS

ARKANSAW, being under no vow, and finding curiosity stronger in the fresh light of a new day than his courage had been the evening past, returned to the scene of exploration next morning. He skulked up cautiously through the corn with a shotgun in hand, like he was creeping up on game. Hugh was sitting in the tent door, reading his little blue book.

"Gosh!" said Arkansaw, standing the butt of his gun across his toe, making free with his big handkerchief on his face, "I felt my hairs drop down like a pacificated purp's when I saw you settin' there, Hugh."

Hugh put his little book in his pocket. "How are they all at home?" he asked.

"Oh, she's all right," Arkansaw replied, grinning to see the schoolmaster blush. "John didn't show up?"

"No."

"Anything come around?"

"Moore and Juliet came down a little while after you left to ask me up to supper."

"You didn't—wasn't nothing else happened in the night, Hugh?"

"Not a thing."

Arkansaw stood thinking it over, looking at the toe of his boot where his gun-stock rested.

"You don't expect him back, neither, honest and square, do you Hugh?" he asked, looking up suddenly, like he had plotted to surprise the truth out of the schoolmaster.

"I don't know what to think about it, Arkansaw."

"Mystery says he won't never come back. I reckon you'll believe her, won't you?"

"In the light of all that has gone before, it seems only reasonable to believe that we've seen the last of John Randolph, Arkansaw. Is the river still rising?"

"Yes, it looks like the old man's marycle's goin' to turn out all right. That dad-gan river she's a hummin' this morning nearly as high as she was last spring, and still a comin' up."

"It begins to look like a flood."

"The weather man in Kansas City, he telegraphed to the postmaster at Richfield to watch out for fifteen foot more of a rise that's comin'."

"When was that?"

"Last night. The postmaster sent the

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telegram over to Joel, and Joel he's roustin' everybody along the Narris that can handle a shovel this morning to go up and throw a levee acrosst a weak place at the head where the river might bust in."

Hugh stood looking at Arkansaw as if he did not credit the evidence of his own ears.

"You mean they're going to throw up a levee across the head of the Narris to keep the river out—is that what you mean?"

"That's sure what I said."

"There's no danger up there," said Hugh with confident finality.

"There's a dreen that's been cuttin' down through a low place, and Joel he's afraid fifteen foot on top of what's already in the river might put her in there. Monees! If she ever got a little stream as big as your arm started through there it 'd be Katy-bar-the-door for these here folks down in the Narris."

Arkansaw was anxious to be on his way to the head of the Narris, where he knew he would find a hungry crowd eager for his news from the treasure-hunter's camp. He had not been gone many minutes when the Narris dwellers began to arrive to investigate the matter for themselves, the word of Randolph's disappearance having spread.

YELLOW and smoky they came out of the willows along the edge of Skillet Lake, and through Moore's corn. Neither age nor sex was a barrier to the satisfying of the curiosity which rose and burned in them and drew them cautiously forward until they stood gathered deep around the excavation.

Old men who leaned knotty hands on crook-handled hickory canes shook their heads and peered with watery eyes into the hole, flat-bodied women pressing beside them with malarious children at their legs. Everyone appeared adolescent or smokily mature. There seemed to be no happy middle ground of youth. Life's business appeared to have begun early for the people of the Narris, and to have come to them somber and spirit-killing.

The men were clothed in patched and faded khaki and blue overalls, the women in sad ginghams and unfixed prints. Nothing about them looked like it ever had been new. Even the babies in their mothers' arms, faces gummed over with molasses and crumbs, looked as if they had come into the world second-hand.

They were a poor, suspicious and credulous people. They lived scantily, and with little effort, and died in dry senility without resistance. Resistance of anything, save the innovations of civilization and progress, was against the Narris creed.

They did not marvel among themselves about, nor ply Hugh with questions nor inflict him with their opinions. Mainly they stood and stared with dull tobacco-drugged eyes, storing up sensations and theories to be discussed among themselves by and by. When Caleb Moore came up presently they drew off, afraid of his stern face.

Moore bore the marks of a worrisome night. His face was drawn into the look of age, a sad anxiety in it that was as sharp as a cry of pain. He spoke sparingly to Hugh, asking no needless questions, advancing no hollow hopes. Often he stopped in his slow, thoughtful walking about the tragic spot, drew himself up and stood with clenched hands and frowning face as if protesting against the unreasonable puzzles which had been set before him so frequently and so long.

"I suppose it is a matter that will have to be reported to the authorities if he doesn't come back today, Hugh," he said as he turned to go back to the house.

"I expect Gregg has done that already."

"Not because of any good the county officers can do," said Moore, "but because suspicion grows foul in the narrow minds of the people around us. God knows I have lived under a cloud of it long enough—I sometimes think I could not bear any more."

"Vindication will come in all things, Mr. Moore, as it has come in some of them, as it is coming in others. They laughed when you held out that the steam-

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boats would come back to the river, but they are here."

"I'll never live to see it cleared away, Hugh. The going of this boy tears me like I'd lost another son."

"Have you heard that the river is threatening to break over into the Narris?"

Moore's breath stopped between his lips, his face grew pale. Where one would have looked for justified triumph there was only a dead grayness, a straining as of an added pain.

"I heard that it was rising, I didn't know it was that high."

"Langworthy and others are at work up there this morning building a levee across the lowest place. The weather bureau has sent out a flood warning,"

Moore shook his head, his sadness still upon him.

"If it's to come in at this time it will come, in spite of all the levees they can build," he said. It seemed that he did not believe the fulfillment of his word was eminent.

The news of the approaching flood appeared rather to overwhelm him and make his senses dull by its stupendousness. However it may have been, whatever turmoil it had stirred in his soul, the old man stood now looking away up the valley, choked with corn and elder-thickets, spread with green pastures and mowed meadow-lands.

"I must tell Juliet," said he after a while, wrenching his gaze away from the line of trees that marked the head of the Narris. "I must tell her all these things, I must take away from her the last hope. Poor boy, poor boy!"

MOVING slowly, as if his feet were numb, the old man left the schoolmaster, saying no other word. He did not glance behind him, nor lift his head from its thoughtful droop. His hands were clasped behind his back; there was a stoop in his shoulders, as if he had become suddenly conscious of the burden of his years.

All that day and night Hugh Atchison stood his vigil at the grave of the *Morning Star,* with little hope that the treasure-hunter would return. But there was a purpose in his watch aside from that small hope, although he made no mention of it to any living soul.

He slept little that night, and woke at dawn to doze no more, dew-chilled and heavy with a feeling of sickness. The dread of that man-swallowing mystery had grown on him during his solitary watch until it drowned him now in shadow and drenched him in fear. It was the soul-deep, primitive fear that comes over a man in the dark, the inherited terror of creeping monsters converging upon that little point of earth where his shuddering body stands.

After the sun warmed away the paleness of his face and widened the circle of security around him, Hugh went to Moore's to report his empty night. The old man was watching his coming, and met him midway between gate and porch. There was no need asking questions; the schoolmaster's sad face told the news like a headline in a red-letter newspaper.

Moore himself had been out of bed since before day. Ever since the steamboats had begun to ply the river he had spent a great deal of time on his second-story porch watching the stream through his field-glasses. But this morning he had not been watching for boats. The growing flood had held his eyes. He seemed saddened by it rather than rejoiced, as if he had called a stern and awful judgment upon those who had condemned him and made his life heavy, and that the shadow of it came sadly over his soul.

"If I had been firmer, not so foolishly responsive to the quick fire of youth, I could have saved him," Moore said, as he walked to the house with Hugh. "I should have denied him, I should have been firm to my old stand on the exploration of this thrice-cursed wreck!"

For a little Hugh was silent. Then: "I haven't given up hope that he'll come back today."

"He will not come back, Hugh. Sit a minute"—he moved a chair forward on the

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porch—"and I'll see about breakfast; you haven't had breakfast yet?"

"Yes, some little while ago."

"I was early this morning, too, watching the river. Remarkable how it keeps creeping up in this summer weather; but the papers say there have been deluges along the northern tributaries and the Kaw, and in the mountains at the source."

"Yes, I have seen it."

"It never has risen this way at this season of the year before in my time, never in my time." Moore shook his head, as if mourning some public catastrophe. He sat thoughtfully a spell. "Hugh, I think you'd better give it up and put a blast of dynamite beside that infernal hole, and blow it full of earth again. It's a useless wait, a groundless hope. Randolph never will come back to finish that work, and no other hand ever shall touch it."

"I'll give him another day, and then, if he doesn't come, I'll do as you say."

"You're a man out of a thousand to do what you have done, waiting down there through the night. I wouldn't have done it, for all the gold in all the lost ships of the sea!"

CHAPTER XX

IF IT TAKES YEARS

HUGH looked at him in surprise, scarcely able to credit him ears. Moore did not turn his face; there was no sounding to be made of his eyes, no hazard of what lay behind his solemn declaration. Now he went on: "You know me as a practical man, a man of material qualities, in spite of my current notoriety for unsoundness." He turned quickly to Hugh, in more of appeal than question.

"I never have doubted your balance, Mr. Moore."

"But I am either insane or I have seen what man—I have been warned. This sad event was foreshadowed to me, I tried to make it plain to that poor lad. Hugh Atchison, I have seen—I have seen—"

Moore stood, his hand trembling on the back of his chair, sweat starting suddenly from his forehead. His words were left swinging there like a broken bridge. He said no more, only stood there looking about him in a manner of fearful surprise, like a man finding himself walking abroad in his sleep. In a few moments he sat down again, and remained silent, as if his thoughts had dissolved and all recollection of his disturbing subject had passed away.

Hugh did not press him to resume it, but a sudden question of the old man's soundness had risen in him. Seeing that he was not going to pursue his remarkable declaration with any clarifying discussion, Hugh spoke of the river.

"They say the new levee at the head of the Narris will stand a ten-foot rise. The weather bureau sees only four feet coming."

"When the time comes for the river to run her again, the levee that they've built will not stop it, any more than my hand would stop it," said the old man, a little impatiently. He stretched out his hand as if he interposed it against the sweep of the Missouri's waters. It still trembled, and his face was pale. "What is a little wall of dirt against the plan of the Almighty, set and ordained for the appointed hour? It will go like paper before a fire!"

"Yes, the river looks big enough today to tear its way through the hills over there," said Hugh.

Moore began to march up and down the long porch, his shoulders pulled back, the briskness of his accustomed strength returning to him.

"Let them build their levees to keep the river away from me, let them shape up their little wall of sand! In God's own time and way the river will come back to the Narris, and to me, Hugh Atchison. And when it comes, I'll be ready for it. The boats will be stopping at my dock again, Price City will be revived."

In his excitement Moore walked away and left the schoolmaster, striking off across the lawn as if going to greet the first boat at his ancient wharf, the sun gleaming on his white head.

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Over where a row of tall hollyhocks flared in flamboyant luster he stood looking away up the river. Only a little glimpse of it could be seen from there, sparkling innocently in the sun, but the old man strained as if he listened for the murmur of its waters in the Narris; as if he hoped that it had swept away the levee and was coming in dark majesty to bring commerce again to his door.

JULIET came out timidly. She stood a moment near the door, looking across the lawn toward the old man, and then came swiftly, gliding on tiptoe, to the place where the schoolmaster waited. In his troubled amazement over the old man's sudden display of erratic mind, Hugh had stood mentally groping, like one feeling for a door in the dark.

"He's been talking about the river coming back," she whispered. She was nervous and anxious, pale and worried. All of her movements were quick and furtive, as if she feared a rude sound would bring some new calamity.

"He spoke of it, Miss Juliet."

"It seems to have taken possession of him—he was up before day, he hasn't talked of anything else."

"The event justifies it, Miss Juliet. The river never has made a midsummer rise like this in the memory of man, they say."

"Do you believe it will break over into the Narris, Mr. Atchison?"

"There's no telling—it may. It must be that the danger of it is grave, or they wouldn't have gone to the trouble to build the levee."

"*Grandpère* has taken that greatly to heart, as much as he despises the uselessness of their effort. He seems to feel that Joel Langworthy has turned against him in that simply humane work to protect lives and property. I'm afraid, Mr. Atchison, that this new trouble over Mr. Randolph, and the excitement of the boats and the flood, have combined to strain his reason."

Hugh shook his head as if to discount her well-founded thought, glad that the old man had turned and was coming back to the house, walking fast.

"I'm going over to take a look at the river at close quarters," Moore announced. "It will be a sight worth seeing this morning, Hugh. Juliet, would you like to go?"

"I think I'd rather not, *grandpère*. I'm afraid of it when it hurries along that way, full of drift, and spreads out over the fields. It's the cancer of rivers, Mr. Atchison, it eats away fields and homesteads under its horrible black current."

She shook her head sadly as she spoke of it, the pain of her lonely years beside it, the sorrow of its tragedies, in her eyes.

"You have little cause to love it, my poor bird!" the old man said. He took up his soft black hat from the chair where he had thrown it, covered his white head and left them. They watched him go in silence, but there were tears in Juliet's eyes.

Hugh could see in her face that which told him life had broken off for her, leaving her shuddering on the lip of a chasm which her hope could not leap.

"I was going down there,"—nodding toward the wreck—"to see you this morning, Mr. Atchison, and beg you to give up this watch before this terrible mystery takes another life. Maybe you could do more if you turned somewhere else, maybe you could find some trace of where he went."

"I've been thinking the same, Miss Juliet, only for one reason I want to stay another night at the camp. Then, if nothing happens, we'll turn to other places."

"Where could he have gone—what could have happened to him?" She seemed to protest, impatiently, against the tangle that she could not penetrate.

"It seems impossible that a strong and healthy man could drop out of sight that way, just like he'd walked into water," the schoolmaster said.

"If none had gone before him, in the same way, and in the same spot, it wouldn't be so—so stifling! You know how the others disappeared—just like they'd walked into water, too."

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"It's heart-breaking, almost maddening, thinking of it and struggling with it," he said. "But what man has devised, man can penetrate."

"Oh, it's cruel, it's unjust—the way these troubles come to us! This last blow is the hardest of all—he was so courageous and honest! Oh, it's unjust, unjust!"

The words burst from her passionately; she stood straight and protesting, as if challenging the hidden force that had wrought so evilly in that family, and with all who touched it, to come into the open and fight where it could be grappled. A warmth kindled in the schoolmaster's heart for her, the glad, quick feeling of a wanderer who meets a friend in a far desert land. He knew what it was to hasten to meet hope, and turn away with empty hand.

"I will find out what has become of him—if I have to give years to it, I'll find out."

The schoolmaster spoke with no dramatic inflection, very quietly, but entirely convincing of the force behind his declaration.

"If you can find him— Oh, if you can only find him!" she said.

"Here is Langworthy coming," the schoolmaster said, looking down the road that ran like a mowed swath through the corn.

CHAPTER XXI

VOICES IN THE NIGHT

JOEL carried himself like one sent for and arriving full of concern. His face expressed with fine shading a mingling of surprise and shock, bordering on fright, and in his earnestness to throw himself into the service of Juliet Moore in solving this last and greatest tragedy of her sad house, he took no pains to turn his blasted cheek and hold it out of sight.

"I would have come before," Joel hastened to explain, "but I was heels over head in work on that levee. I couldn't take the story of his disappearance seriously yesterday, anyhow. I thought, just like you must have thought"—to Hugh—"that he'd gone on some sudden business and forgot to leave any word."

"We thought so yesterday," Hugh said, willing to put aside his dislike for Joel in the face of this friendly spirit to be of help where sharp minds and steady heads were needed in that hour.

"But he hasn't come," Joel shook his head, "I cut through past the camp to see."

"It is such a perplexing thing," Juliet complained, in her manner of throwing herself against the barbs, "that between the dread and the anxiety we are almost crazy. What do you think about it, Mr. Langworthy? How can a man disappear that way?"

"Well, the earth doesn't swallow men—especially not in the Missouri, Miss Juliet," Joel said, the clear beauty of his cold face presenting in sharp outline as he turned his head to look down the corn-field road.

"Then you think he's still alive? You think you can find him?"

"I think we may find him, but I wouldn't go so far as to say that we'd find him alive." Here Joel turned to Hugh again. "My theory is that he went to the river for a swim. The Missouri is a dangerous stream for a stranger."

"Oh, you believe he's drowned!"

A SHUDDER ran over her, as if she felt the thick waters of the Missouri dragging her down among the secrets which they covered and the crimes they hid.

"Did the others before him go to the river for a swim?" Hugh asked, with a cold contempt for this hypothesis.

"There's only a network of myths and superstitions to be faced in connection with the others," Joel replied, rather hotly. "We haven't a thread of evidence that they ever disappeared at all. You've got to prove corpus delicti in any case before you can establish that a man is dead."

"Then if Randolph never turns up dead, we are to take it for granted that he sneaked off and is still alive," said the schoolmaster, his scorn deepening.

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"We'll not argue it," said Joel.

"No, let's combine all our efforts to find him, living or—dead." The word was hard for her to speak; it seemed to stick in her throat like a burr.

Joel looked away, as if his fine delicacy forbade witnessing her pain over the absence of this stranger who had come among them to dig for the golden key of the world.

"The best that I can offer you of my own efforts, Miss Juliet, and all that I can command in others are at your service," Joel said, with a certain high dignity to which even Hugh, with all his prejudice, was not insensible.

Juliet searched Joel's face for that subtle, unread something that had made her shrink from him and grow cold in his presence. Today that repulsive mystery was absent; his face as clear as sunshine.

"I expect the sheriff will be down this morning," said Hugh, "in fact I expected him yesterday, for Gregg left here determined to report to him."

Joel shook his head with frowning disapproval. He looked quickly at Juliet. "Does Caleb Moore approve such haste?" he asked.

"I'm afraid he doesn't," she told him sadly. "You know his dread of notoriety."

"He's right about it, too, in my opinion," Joel said. "If Randolph's seen fit to take his foot in his hand and walk off, the sheriff can't find him any quicker than the next man, and if he's just away on business he'll resent any publicity over it just like you or I would, Mr. Atchison. I'll go over to Richfield and telephone him not to come—I've got plenty time to catch him before his train leaves."

"Perhaps it would be best," Juliet said. "Surely if you two men can't find him the sheriff will be useless."

"You give us too much credit for our sharpness, Miss Juliet—at least me. I am as dull as an iron wedge, but I can put two and two together when I see them before my eyes."

Joel said it with a wise turn of the head, as if he hinted that he could piece our circumstances unseen by others to account for Randolph's disappearance if he wanted to be so blunt and ordinary as to speak his mind in the presence of a lady. Juliet must have caught this shrewd shadow in Joel's face, for she glanced up at him sharply, her cheeks fading pale again.

"You don't believe he's drowned!" She spoke accusingly, as if she felt that Joel had advanced that theory with the plain intention to deceive.

"When I said that, I jumped to the worst conclusion first," said Joel. "That possibility remains, for Arkansaw says he was always harping on the lack of decent water to swim in around here. Schoolteacher must have heard him."

HUGH had drawn out of the conversation, according to his habit when Joel was present. At this direct appeal with its little barb of insolence, the schoolmaster turned his back and walked apart. His lofty superiority and silent disdain of Joel's theories, as well as his innuendo, brought a flush to the farmer-lawyer's face.

Joel made short work of his withdrawal from Juliet's presence, usually enlarged to a ceremony. No further word passed between him and Hugh, although Joel turned the black side of his face on the schoolmaster with malignant look as he went by to mount his waiting horse at the gate.

With Joel's going Hugh returned to his post beside the old steamboat's grave. The day flamed up, and all green things on the shores of the Missouri hung limp as if fire had been kindled under their leaves. The river itself, grown great with its flood water, ran brown that day. The tawny yellow of its slack and lazy days had deepened, like the mane of a lion grown old.

Nobody came to break the long silence as the schoolmaster waited out the day in the shade of Randolph's tent; not even Arkansaw, moved by his fearful curiosity, nor Joel Langworthy, to carry out in deed his ardent protestations of willingness to

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serve. Only at evening when the sun had gone, and dusk was falling, Juliet herself came, sorrowing as one who mourned the dead.

"*Grandpère* has gone to look at the river again," she said.

"Is it still rising?"

"Yes, or it was this morning. Oh, I hope it will not go any higher. It seems like disaster is hovering everywhere around us that it hasn't fallen already. Even *grandpère*—even *grandpère!*"

She sat on the box that Hugh had placed for her. He stood near, tender in his pity for the sorrow of her young life.

"He seems altered, I noticed it this morning," he said. Then quickly, in depreciation of what had slipped him. "It's this onrush of sudden excitement and worry. It's nothing for you to take trouble over, Miss Juliet. Naturally his interest in the river is very strong at this time."

"After all that he has gambled on it," said she, too weary and dispirited to put much stress of bitterness into her words.

"We're all gamblers in this life when it comes to that, Miss Juliet, but your grandfather has been a little more—more—"

"Spectacular," she supplied. "I didn't mean it just that way, I was casting around for something softer. He has been conscientious, he has played his game like a man."

"And paid his losses out of the hearts and souls of himself and his family! Mr. Atchison, poor old *grandpère* is paying the last stake with his reason—he is going mad."

"Oh, not so bad as—"

"I can see it, I have seen it in flashes and glimpses for the past two or three years.

There was no need in attempting a lame denial of what he had felt all day to be a fact, so Hugh did not undertake it. He walked away from her a few steps, the somberness of the situation pressing upon him a heavy load.

"Mr. Randolph had seen it, he could have told you."

"He didn't mention it to me," the schoolmaster said.

Juliet went to him, looking about her fearfully into the gathering dusk.

"Mr. Atchison, if I believed—if you believed—there were such things as demons and spirits, I would say that *grandpère* has seen them at the window in the night. Twice when Mr. Randolph was there, the last time on the night before he—went away."

"Did he see something that disturbed him?"

"He seemed to see something that turned his blood to ice. We couldn't see it," she whispered, "we looked—he threw a tumbler through the pane—but there was nothing, nothing that we could see!"

HUGH recalled what the old man had said of the warning that he had received, and wondered how much of it had been ghostly. No more of it, he believed, than had been ethereal of Arkansaw's snapping assailant which had turned to bones under his hand.

"The Narris is a place of strange fancies, Miss Juliet. I think they waver up from the accumulation of old tragedies which lay here unsolved."

"I haven't been free from them today myself," she confessed, nodding with the serious gravity of a child. "Several times this afternoon I thought"—she looked about in the deeping gloom, turning her white face this way and that as if she feared a surprise—"I heard somebody calling me. I heard it so plainly that it was all I could do to hold myself back from running and answering, just like I'd do if I knew somebody in the last extremity was calling on me for help. It was the strangest fancy! It left me tired, and old."

"Nonsense! You're only a little tired-out girl, Miss Juliet, to be taken by the hand and led home. You mustn't talk of being old, life is all before you yet, you've scarcely bitten into it with your baby teeth."

"There can be too much life in front of us sometimes," she sighed, with a fore-

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cast of tears in her wavering voice. "But do you know, Mr. Atchison, when I imagined I heard that voice calling me, urging me, drawing me on, I felt that it was—his, and that he must be alive."

"You're tired, you need rest away from these old troubles and new perplexities, poor child! We'd better be going back to the house—it's going to be so dark in a little while that you can shovel it like snow."

"There!" she whispered, straining forward eagerly, lifting her hand for silence. "There—there it is again! Did you hear it—did you hear it?"

"We'll go back now," the schoolmaster said, holding out his hand as if to lead her home. A great pity smote his heart, crushing it like a grape in the press until the balm of his sympathy flowed out to her, and laved her as if to purge away her sickness. For in that moment he believed that the taint had reached this fair young creature bending there like wheat in the wind, listening for a sound which mortal ears never heard.

Juliet Moore was mad, mad as her old grandfather who nursed a nest of fantoms in his breast.

She turned to him, drawing her breath deeply, as one who sighs for an incomplete melody lost over the waters at night.

"Somebody was calling my name, whispering it, soft, like the wind. I heard it as—there!"

She started away with a sudden bound, ran a few paces, stopped; leaning again in her eager, drinking pose. Hugh sprang after her, thrilled with a new terror that made every nerve in his body crackle.

"Juliet!" he called sternly; "Juliet!"

She faced him, starting as if he had roused her out of sleep. She held out her hands gropingly, confusion in her shadowed face and troubled eyes.

"Oh, I thought somebody—it was the same that I heard before, calling my name—down in that direction. I thought maybe—I thought it might be—"

"There is nobody calling you, Juliet—there is nobody calling you," said the schoolmaster slowly, as if repeating a hard lesson to a dull child. He laid his hands on her shoulders and bent near to look into her eyes, where there was a cloud as from the vaporings of a subtile narcotic.

"Oh, how foolish of me!" she said, still far away from him in her understanding, like one staggering and sleep-heavy.

"When that fancy comes over you, Juliet, fight it, throw it off. Take hold of something, this way," he grasped her hand and wrung it sharply, "and pull yourself back, pull yourself back!"

"Back?" she repeated, still a little dazed.

"You must not listen to it, you must not listen to it, Juliet."

"What is it, what makes me think—"

"It is madness, death!"

"Oh, if I could only sleep, and forget for one little hour!" She pressed her palms to her eyes as if they throbbed and ached. Presently the schoolmaster saw that she was crying into her hot little hands; her piteous low sobs came struggling against her will to hide them in her sore sad heart.

THAT grief was not the sorrow of childhood, those moans were not the lamentations of youth. Juliet Moore, the fair, the young willow swaying in the wind, was dim as one far away in his recollection then. This woman stood shuddering as one grown old under many sorrows; the voice of her affliction bitter as the pang of death. World-old was her plaint uttered into the falling night, world-gathered her inheritance of pain. In all places, in all times, a woman must stand in the end to weep her best-beloved.

"Tomorrow you will leave the Narris," he said. "I will speak to your grandfather about it, he must send you away back to New Orleans, or somewhere out of the shadow of this damned and blighting place."

He held out his hand; she took it and clung to it, trembling and afraid. The darkness was down behind them, shutting out the trees on the shore of the boggy lake where the frogs were chanting; deep-

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ening ahead of them over Caleb Moore's cornfield. And there was the gloom of hopelessness for his lost friend as deep as the night in the gentle schoolmaster's heart as he led her home through the corn.

Hugh Atchison had a purpose in his long watch at the camp, which he had not disclosed to any person. It was his belief that the hands which had snatched Randolph away between two days would reach out to smother his own life if he remained there, warder over the treasure hunter's unfinished work. He waited for this. If a man watched, he could not be taken unaware.

When he returned from escorting Juliet home, Hugh lit the lantern and moved about the tent as if preparing for bed. He sat under the swinging light and removed his shoes, but there his preparations for turning in ended. When he had put out the light he slipped from the tent, and crouched away through the corn.

Several rods below the camp he came out, and proceeded with great caution and silence into the cleared space around the excavation. From there he crept on hands and knees to a position which brought the tent between him and the skyline. The stars were brilliant in a clear sky; only the ground-darkness was thick.

He was as completely hidden in his shadowy valley as if the Misouri already had come back to its old road and covered him with its muddy waters, but any prowler who approached the tent, its canvas tucked up on all sides, could be seen by him. The schoolmaster had no firearm. He had provided himself with a piece of the sounding pipe of convenient length, and this he kept under his hand as he laid himself along in the shadow of the valley. Man or devil, he was ready to meet him, and there was not a hair on his head that felt a nervous shiver at its root.

Close by his hand as he fumbled in the dark, aimlessly breaking sprangles from the brittle purslane which grew cold and rank around him, he found one of the holes which they had driven in the first days of their exploration. This one remained open, untrampled by the feet as they had come and gone around it all those weeks. Here was a new marvel for him in a moment. That little spot, scarcely bigger than a silver dollar, had remained untrodden in that trampled place, as a man walks in battle with a million balls flying around him and passes untouched.

AS HE turned this thing over in his mind he began snapping short pies of purslane and dropping them down the hole, as if some new and serious business had come into his hands. He wondered vaguely in the background of his rabble thoughts how long it would take him to fill the hole.

It would be a good way to pass the hours if the purslane would hole out within reach.

Nobody came prowling to the tent; no living thing big enough to make a sound with its body had come into the swale where he waited for the unknown. Now the Big Dipper indicated two o'clock. Soon there would come a leak of daylight into the night.

The schoolmaster stopped in his dropping of purslane into the hole, his hand hovering over it, the muscles of his arm still as if paralysis had struck him. Out of the bowels of the earth an unbelievable thing had issued, a sound that sent a shiver over his body and moved the roots of his hair like a wind.

A human voice, faint, smothered, low; calling him by name.

For a moment the schoolmaster doubted that he was awake. He looked up at the north star, and listened to the whir of night life; he put out his hand and felt the iron pipe among the purslane at his side. Awake, but full of imaginings, induced by fatigue and an over-labored mind.

It could not be otherwise, for that voice that called up to him out of the ground was Jonathan Randolph's voice, and poor Jonathan Randolph was among the dead.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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"Run—the fire'll surround you!" He gasped. Because the fire had surrounded them all

Two Steps from Hades

By CARL RATHJEN

Author of "It Rained One Night," "It Happened Like This," etc.

Stoneman wasn't a hero—just an ordinary sort of guy with a job of work to do. And then because a camper was careless with his ashes, Stoneman's world went up in a bright sea of flame.

THE worst forest fire in the history of Los Angeles County was devouring the Santa Monica Mountains, and inwardly Stoneman felt rebellious flames threatening to devastate his sense of duty as a deputy-sheriff.

Overhead thick grayish-black smoke roiled with the pall of dusk as he drove rapidly up the Topanga Canyon road with Reiter sitting beside him. A sullen glow flushed redly across the heavy sky and reflected dimly on Reiter's dour face, revealing the bristling black mustache powdered with ashen particles.

"No halfway measures about Southern California," Reiter growled. "Last winter I damn near drowned in the floods and now we're being roasted for Thanksgiving."

Stoneman nodded grimly and squinted through the windshield.

"Well," Reiter grumbled, "one thing, George, you don't have to worry about your wife this time like during the floods."

Stoneman looked at him sharply and those hot flames of rebellion leaped hungrily He jammed harder on the gas. He didn't say anything.

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"By the way," Reiter asked, "I didn't hear you leave word like the rest of the boys to phone Mary you wouldn't be home to supper. Lucky if we get home for Thanksgiving Dinner tomorrow the way this inferno's going. How come?"

"She's not home," Stoneman said curtly, then pressed his lips.

Reiter stared at him. "All right, you don't have to take my head off just because I ask if . . . Say, just where is Mary? Why were you trying to make all those phone calls to Arrowhead Springs way out in San Berdoo County before we were ordered out here? George, is Mary at Arrow—"

Silently Stoneman nodded. Reiter swore softly.

"Arrowhead Springs going up in smoke too," he muttered, "and you're here, seventy-five miles away at the wrong fire."

"Do you have to keep reminding me?"

They rode silently.

Stoneman fought the impulse—no, the intense yearning—to let his eyes seek a place on the ash-covered road where he could turn the car around. He *was* at the wrong fire. He should be racing seventy-five miles eastward to San Bernardino County to find Mary. His broad, homely face was linen-white under soot-grime and smoke. The dark eyes were themselves twin sparks.

He should have started for there at noon when word drifted into the L. A. sheriff's office about the fire flaring to furious life on Strawberry Peak beyond the city of San Bernandino. But first he'd called the long-distance operator and tried phoning the Arrowhead Springs Hotel to tell Mary not to take any chances, to get out before the gale-like winds racing from the Mohave Desert caught the fire and carried it along. But he couldn't get the call through, either the wires were down already or the fire wardens had taken them over for their own work. He'd tried to find out about the people staying at the hotel, but he got nowhere.

He got permission to leave for the dash to San Berdoo, and then . . .

He was just leaving the office when the news from close at hand came flashing in.

LOS ANGELES COUNTY had its own fire on its hands now. In Topanga Canyon over near Malibu Beach. No one knew yet how it had started, but it might become a holocaust, for the United States Weather Bureau had posted warnings last night of high winds from the north, ranging up to 52 miles an hour.

Stoneman saw that no one noticed him pausing in the doorway. They thought he had left. He thought of the hundreds of homes, the people imperiled in Topanga and adjacent canyons of the Santa Monica Mountains.

But there was fire too in San Berdoo County, and Mary was down there. And he had permission to leave.

He went back to the sheriff and reported for duty. Wouldn't the San Berdoo fire-wardens see that Mary and the other people at Arrowhead Hot Springs were saved just as he was thinking of the people it was his job to save?

Wouldn't they? They *had* to, they would, he tried to reassure himself as he raced up Topanga Canyon. Up ahead the whole world seemed aflame. The car labored up the grade as though reluctant to go farther. The air was hot, stifling, rasping Stoneman's nostrils and throat with dry ash. Reiter coughed and blew his nose lustily. He coughed again.

Before three houses Stoneman blasted the horn insistently as he yanked the handbrake. Reiter was swinging out before the skidding car stopped. He was pounding on the door of one house as Stoneman dodged from the path of a car that loomed suddenly in the blizzard of ashes in a driveway. The car stopped with a squeal of brakes.

"What do you want?" a white-faced woman demanded, sitting beside a grim-faced man leaning over the wheel. The back of the car was loaded with belongings wrapped in blankets and sheets.

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"Keep going, fast," Stoneman waved them on, starting toward the next house. "Get out of here."

The man nodded and ground the gears. The woman pointed toward the third house.

"The folks in there wouldn't leave with us," she cried as the car lurched into the road. Stoneman, striding around a bush studded with yellow chrysanthemums, heard her calling to Reiter.

A little girl with flaxen hair and sky-blue eyes opened the door in answer to Stoneman's knocking.

"Hello, sister," said Stoneman. "I want to speak to your daddy or mother or whoever's home with you."

Reiter joined Stoneman just inside the doorway as a thunderous roar came steadily from up the canyon. Inside the house a radio was blaring.

". . . fire in San Bernardino County started shortly before noon when an oil stove exploded in a cabin on Strawberry Peak. Fire-fighters are now hard-pressed battling the flames rushing down Waterman Canyon under the impetus of a forty-mile wind.

"Ventura County, north of Los Angeles County, is also having its troubles. Two brush fires have . . ."

Stoneman frowned. What ailed that announcer? What about Arrowhead Hot Springs near the foot of Waterman Canyon? Was the hotel endangered? Had the guests been warned to leave? Got out?

The little girl returned with a woman who shut off the radio. A pudgy man approached Stoneman and Reiter.

"You've got to get out of here," said Stoneman. "This whole place is liable to go in a few minutes."

He was short and bald and snappish. He planted his feet squarely on the carpet and stared unwaveringly at Stoneman.

"No fear of that," the man replied, raising his voice slightly above the roaring vibration of the air. "The house is stucco construction all around outside. Aluminum window frames. Tile roof. Nothing for fire to—"

"Don't take any chances," warned Stoneman. "Put your family into your car and—"

"I know just how I stand," the man cut in somewhat defiantly. "I've got thirty feet of bare ground all around the house. Fire can't come any closer than—"

Reiter shook his head and cinders flew from his hat brim. "We don't care if you're a Hindu fire-walker," he snapped. "We got orders to clear you out of here. You're going and you're going to like—"

"Easy, Reiter," said Stoneman, seeing the man's face flush. "Listen, mister, we won't argue about whether your house is safe or not. If it is, it'll be here when you get back. But you can't stay here while—"

He stopped suddenly as he noticed the flush on the woman's face, even the little girl's. The woman suddenly pointed to a window and screamed.

"The fire! Oh God!"

Stoneman saw the orange-red glare in the room. He looked toward the window. Everything a short distance away was a solid wall of flame. He saw a thick bush dissolve in fluid orange. The roar was staggering to the senses.

The man needed no further urging to dash for the door. Stoneman swept the little girl into his arms. Reiter was guiding the woman. She paused.

"I almost forgot. One of the burners on the range is still—"

"Come on," snapped Reiter, pushing her toward the door.

Outside it was like running into the hot breath of a furnace. The yellow chrysanthemums had shriveled and wilted. A rabbit streaked past Stoneman and huddled under the running-board of the car.

"Oh, the poor bunny," cried the little girl.

Stoneman reached under the car and scooped up the trembling furry body. He handed it to the girl who cuddled it. He was kicking the starter, spinning the wheel, ramming down the gas, choking and coughing with ash in his throat.

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"Look back," Reiter gasped.

Glancing in the mirror Stoneman saw the man and woman twisting about. He glimpsed the house suddenly engulfed in flames, a window bursting and smoke pouring out. The woman was sobbing. The man was gratefully squeezing Stoneman's shoulder and mumbling an apology for his resistance.

LEAVING Reiter in the car Stoneman dashed into the sheriff's sub-station in Malibu to ask about the San Berdoo fire, seventy-five miles away.

"Who the hell cares about San Berdoo?" flared an officious deputy Stoneman did not know. "Ain't we got enough trouble of our own?" He shoved a slip of paper at Stoneman. "Get up that road and make sure everyone's out."

A lanky newspaper photographer, pulling film packs from his case, glanced at Stoneman. "San Berdoo? The last I heard the Arrowhead Springs Hotel burned down. Completely destroyed."

Stoneman stood rigidly.

"What about the people? Did they get out?"

"Don't know," said the photographer. "Here, bud," he said, handing the film packs to a short, pimply-faced fellow in riding breeches and puttees. "Hop on that puddle-jumper and get these down to the city room. Then come right back for more."

Stoneman caught himself estimating how speedily a motorcycle could reach San Berdoo.

"Wait a minute," he called. He turned to the photographer. "As long as your messenger's—coming back, can he bring word from your paper for me about the people at Arrowhead Springs? About Mary Stoneman, if possible?"

"Sure thing," promised the photographer, scribbling a note which he handed to the messenger.

The excited deputy was shouting at Stoneman.

"Get going, will you!" The deputy yelled at another man, "Murphy, the fire wardens need more help. Order more men to be drafted from . . ."

Stoneman hurried outside. Sparks flew overhead. Someone yelled the fire had spread into Las Flores Canyon to the west and Santa Ynez to the east. People were becoming alarmed in the city of Santa Monica. Roosevelt Highway here had been closed to traffic, but a few cars had gotten through at the last minute. Deputies were stopping them and ordering the men out and telling the women to drive on. A fat man was protesting.

"I don't care if you are a big shot," a deputy retorted. "You're being drafted. Get in that truck and you'll soon find out if the fire is impressed with your importance."

Stoneman and Reiter raced for Topanga Canyon road again, the headlights futilely trying to pierce the night and smoke. Reiter hunched in the corner of the seat.

"When I was a kid," he jibed sourly, "the only ambition I ever had was to be a cop, one of these guys who always shoots it out with criminals. I never had any thoughts of running away to sea or becoming a fireman like most kids. So what happens, I become a deputy sheriff and last winter I play sailor in the floods and now—it's a crazy world," he grunted.

"You're getting gabby," said Stoneman, skidding the car into Topanga Canyon. "It's not like you, but thanks for trying to keep my mind off . . . Arrowhead Springs."

Reiter scowled at the leaping red mountains ahead and glanced sourly at a sign.

CLOSED AREA—NO SMOKING OR CAMP-FIRES PERMITTED BEYOND THIS POINT.

"They forgot to list forest fires," he growled.

Ashes struck the windshield as thickly as snowflakes in a blizzard. Stoneman had to switch on the windshield wipers. The fire roared high over head up on the mountains to either side of the canyon. He felt tense pain in the back of his neck. If those flames worked down and trapped Reiter and himself . . .

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He had to go on, just as he prayed if Mary were trapped San Berdoo County deputies and fire wardens would go in after her.

UP A side road he and Reiter came upon a county fire truck, like a big gasoline truck, but filled with water. The road beyond was blocked by a slide. Part of the mountain had fallen after the bushes and roots had burnt away, leaving nothing to bind the soil together.

"That's nothing," grumbled Reiter, "to what's going to happen here this winter if there are heavy rains with no brush to hold the water back. Fire's burning across the road up there. We can't get through on foot. We might as well give these boys a hand."

Two youths, manning the hose-lines from the truck, were battling flames that crept toward five houses. Stoneman and Reiter joined them. The heat was terrific. There was the stench of hot rubber from the tires of the truck.

A vagrant, extra strong gust of wind, whipped fire across behind Stoneman, trapping him. He flailed desperately with a wet gunny sack.

"Coming, George," Reiter's voice pierced the roar of the flames.

The gunny sack smoldered. Stoneman saw the sleeve of his shirt crumble away from the intense heat. His face felt like rubber stretched beyond its limits. Then water struck him. It hissed into the flames, and Reiter was pulling him back.

"Thanks," Stoneman gasped.

"Thank the kid," Reiter grunted. "He saw you."

"Not a county fireman, are you?" asked Stoneman, as side by side they advanced on the flames.

"Nope," said the youth. "Was drafted in Santa Monica."

There was no time for more talk, but Stoneman wondered why a fire truck was entrusted to two raw fire-fighters. They couldn't stop the advance of the fire, but they did manage to detour it around the five houses before they exhausted the water supply of the truck. Grimy, breathless, they rolled up the hose-lines.

"You're all right, kids," said Stoneman.

Reiter grunted and nodded.

The truck proceeded down the canyon as Stoneman delayed a moment to work a cinder out of his eye. When he and Reiter reached the intersection with Roosevelt Highway they found the truck, and a group of irate county firemen mauling the two youths.

"What's the trouble here?" Stoneman demanded, getting out of the car.

"Arrest these guys," a fireman yelled. "They stole our truck. We parked it here a minute when we got permission to hop down the road for a cup of coffee, and when we came back it—"

"Coffee," Reiter muttered, trying to moisten his cracked lips.

Stoneman's mouth felt furry.

"Take it easy," he said to the firemen. He glanced at the youths. "I wondered how you got this truck," he declared.

"We were told to come out here and help," said one, "and when we saw this full truck with no one making use of it—"

Stoneman smiled slightly and turned to the firemen.

"Don't blame the kids for taking their job seriously," he said, and explained what had been done with the truck up the canyon. One of the firemen grinned sheepishly at the youths.

"I guess it's all right then. But listen you guys, hereafter wait for orders before you—"

"Sure, what're the orders now?"

DOWN on the four-lane Roosevelt Highway squeezed between the towering palisades and the beach homes, Stoneman stopped the car abruptly where fire wardens were setting up a short-wave radio outfit.

"Any news about other fires?" he inquired anxiously.

A fire-warden nodded grimly.

"Remember the Mt. Baldy fire that gave us much trouble earlier this week?

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The wardens down there thought they had it licked this morning. The wind started it up again after most of the men had had only three hours' rest. Ventura and San Diego Counties have got brush fires and—"

"Never mind those," interrupted Reiter. "He wants to know about San Berdoo."

"They're having a tough time of it down there," informed the fire warden. "They were using the Rim of the World Highway as a firebreak. But with the wind behind it the fire jumped clean across. It's sweeping now toward the outskirts of San Berdoo. Six hundred men have been taken from the Mt. Baldy area and sent down there."

Stoneman clenched his hands.

"What about the people at Arrowhead Springs?"

The warden shook his head. "If they haven't gotten out before this . . . the only way folks beyond there at Arrowhead Lake can get out is by taking the old washed-out road down to the Mohave."

A man clutching a seared arm approached and asked Reiter for a lift to a first-aid station.

"This is going to be a hell of a Thanksgiving for a lot of folks," he muttered, climbing in. "Lost my own home, but thank God some of you sheriffs warned me to get my family out in time."

A truckload of CCC boys raced by as Stoneman started the car. At the base hospital set up in Santa Monica where he took the injured man he learned that there were 700 L. A. city firemen, over 1000 CCC boys, and students from the Indian School at Riverside, all helping to fight the fire.

A grimy sheriff's deputy spoke to Stoneman.

"Found out how this inferno started," he declared. "Some guy emptied a stove, thought the ashes were dead, but they weren't. He got scared when he saw the fire getting away from him. He put old ashes in his stove but when we found dry leaves among them he owned up, confessed he was negligent. We found him working hard in a fire-line. He feels pretty rotten about it, never been in trouble before." The deputy shrugged. "Too bad. But after all he did start the fire. You and Reiter better get up to the fire-lines."

Stoneman glanced about but didn't see the lanky newspaper photographer who had promised to try to get word about Mary. He started toward an idle telephone.

Someone said two L. A. fireboats had tied up at Santa Monica while the crews came ashore to get in the fire-lines.

"We'll need them with the brush like tinder and the humidity at zero," said a California Highway patrolman whose inflamed eyes were being treated. "If only this wind would let up . . ."

Stoneman tugged his gaze from the telephone and ran out to the car. A man couldn't let up in this fight, this dual fight against the flames outside and the rebellious flames inside. He passed a couple of deputies with smudged faces seared a fiery red. He remembered the last time he'd seen them they were leading a parade as members of the L. A. sheriff's posse, immaculate in their dark uniforms, mounted on spirited, sleekly groomed horses with Arabian blood.

"Looks like I'll have to change my opinions a bit," Reiter grunted as Stoneman entered the car. "I thought those boys never did anything but ride in parades."

THE ridge-top fire-line of fire-wardens, county and city firemen, CCC boys, police, deputies, civilians, was one step from Hell. In the canyon below flames advanced savagely. Clattering bulldozers labored back and forth, shoving dirt with their plows. Fleets of tank trucks groaned along the firebreak while men wetted down the brush. Stoneman and Reiter, along with others, shovelled dirt to widen the firebreak. Others raced wildly to run down sparks that dropped behind the fire-fighters.

The fire came on like a huge monster

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eating voraciously at the dry brush in the canyon below. Fingers of flame reached ahead, and the whole body of the fire crept forward. It started up toward where the men worked desperately on the ridge. The gale-like wind caught it and with a roar of fury it came leaping upward with incredible speed.

Stoneman breathed heavily in the heat. He felt his eyes watering, but no moisture ran down his grimy cheeks. It evaporated instantly.

"Hold your posts," a warden barked.

Stoneman ducked his head against the searing heat and the angry sparks. He was heaving shovefuls of dirt right into the mass of fire now. The flames turned redder as each spadeful struck. But the fire came on, steaming the precious water right out of the brush. Flame plunged at Stoneman.

"Lay off, lay off," the warden commanded resignedly.

Stoneman retreated with the others, and turning, he discovered the wind had carried sparks over their heads. Spot fires were flaring up in the night as far as two miles away. And closer at hand, a bare half-mile beyond the ridge the whole area was aflame as though the fire, like a river, had found some underground passage and was now flooding out on the surface again.

"Come on, you men," the fire-warden called. "Step lively or we'll be trapped."

They ran, scrambled, slid, tripped their way down to a road where they all piled into trucks that raced recklessly over the narrow twisting canyon roads. They saw people spreading water-soaked blankets and rugs over piles of furniture on the road. Before the home of movie stars there were vans being hurriedly loaded.

The trucks stopped and fire wardens led the breathless clambering way up a narrow trail to a ridge to make a new stand.

From here Stoneman glimpsed the sea and surrounding terrain as wind briefly parted the heavy clouds of smoke.

He was on the eastern front where the fire advanced along Santa Ynez and Temescal Canyons toward the thickly populated Pacific Palisades behind which lay the city of Santa Monica. But on the southern front—in Topanga, Tuna, Las Flores Canyons and the mountains in between—the fire ran wildly, a continuous seven-mile line of leaping flame.

A warden called to a man by a short-wave radio.

"Better send a warning out about that march of the fire. Especially for the folks at Malibu."

The radio operator looked up.

"The Coast Guard cutter *Aurora* is offshore with surfboats to get the Malibu people out if the fire heads for them."

A slight shift of the wind gave the fighters new encouragement. Bulldozers raced along the firebreak. Shovels bit savagely into the soil to make a more insurmountable barrier of the firebreak that always had been adequate in the past. A backfire was started, but the wind wouldn't let it do its work.

The main fire came on with wind-driven sparks sprinkling the sky more thickly than stars ever did. It leaped the firebreak . . .

THERE was another mad swearing scramble for trucks. Another careening ride down to the Roosevelt Highway where there was a strange, awesome sight. The fire and intense heat came from the landside, but the houses between the highway and the water were catching fire from the seaward side. Sparks had somehow blown back from the sea. Nothing could be done there. The trucks raced on.

On to make another stand on the eastern front. Up through Rustic Canyon, past the estate of Will Rogers where men were leading out white-eyed polo ponies. Up on another ridge, another fire-break.

Stoneman saw a flash of white light, the lanky news-photographer.

"Any word from your paper yet," he asked in a cracked voice, "about Mary Stoneman who was staying at the Arrowhead Springs Hotel in San Berdoo?"

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The red-eyed photographer started to shake his head.

"Sorry . . . Hold on, here comes my messenger now."

The messenger brought fresh film packs and a note. Stoneman had to fight the urge to grab that note from the photographer's hands.

"Well?" he demanded anxiously.

The photographer read the note as though he couldn't believe it. He began swearing and thrust the note at Stoneman who read it by the lurid light of the approaching fire. It was from the photographer's city editor. It read:

Your pics aren't so hot. You got too much smoke in them.

Stoneman looked up dazedly. "But he ignored your question about Mary, about my wife."

"That lousy so-and-so," snapped the begrimed photographer. "Let that chair-warmer come up here and see if *he* can get the fire to pose and look pretty."

Stoneman clenched the shovel lest he throw it away and dash down to get a car to race to San Berdoo. He worked savagely, scarcely knowing what he was doing.

He was working at the edge of a steep precipice when he heard voices shouting as though in the distance. Too late he heard Reiter's voice rising above the others.

"George, look out!"

He looked up to see the men near him scrambling aside as a frenzied deer, fleeing the fire, came charging among them. He dropped his shovel and turned away, but the wild-eyed doe rammed him glancingly.

He was falling. A sharp bush clawed his face. He tried to grasp it but tore his fingers. He struck heavily on his side and again fell freely. His heels gouged through sandy soil. He pitched on his face, slid on his back, rolled with arms and legs flying and finally lay still, face up, gasping for breath, feeling as though a million hammers had been pounding him.

He heard boots sliding through gravel. Reiter was bending over him. "Guess I'm all right," he muttered.

Reiter held him down gently. "Lie still, George, you fell fifty feet."

Reiter's hands were feeling over him, arms, legs, ribs. A fire warden arrived with a first-aid kit and a flashlight.

"Any bones broken?"

Reiter shook his head. "His hands will need patching up."

The warden worked quickly. "Better not do any more shoveling with those hands," he advised.

"I'm all right," Stoneman insisted, getting up. He swayed shakenly and Reiter steadied him.

"You've done enough, fellow," Reiter growled. "Take it easy now." He looked intently at Stoneman. "There's nothing more you can do *here*," he hinted.

Stoneman thought of Mary as he rode silently on a tank truck racing down for more water.

"Just came on duty here a little while ago," remarked the driver. "I'm from the Arroyo Seco station over near Pasadena. Sure was tough getting here. For hours the radio announcers have been shouting their heads off for people to stay away from this area and leave the roads clear for us." The driver snorted. "Lot of good that did. The roads are clogged with thousands of sightseers' cars.

"Say, did you hear about San Berdoo? Fire's driving into the swank homes in three place to the north of town. They got eight engine-pumpers out there but they couldn't get enough water with them all pulling at the hydrants. So you know what them smart guys did? They turned on hydrants way back in the city so the streets got flooded and the water ran out to where the pumpers could suck it up for their hoses."

STONEMAN just hunched there and stared at his bandaged hands. Maybe this was a break. If he couldn't shovel, couldn't work any more, there wouldn't be any sense in keeping him here.

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Most telephones were out of commission, but he found one that was working. The sheriff was nearby, but Stoneman decided to make one call first before he asked for leave.

He dialed the operator and gave her his home number. He heard the *brrr!* of the bell in his home way over in Pasadena Glen Canyon. But no one answered. He hesitated a moment, considering the time, it was well after midnight. Then with trembling fingers he got the operator back and gave her a neighbor's number, the Stanley's. They had been down at Arrowhead Springs too.

"Hello?" a woman's voice answered quickly.

"This is George Stoneman. Is Mary at your house? Do you know anything about her? Did she leave the hotel with you?"

"She was getting ready to leave in her own car right after us," replied Mrs. Stanley. Her voice broke anxiously. "We barely escaped in time. We waited for her on the road to San Bernardino but —but she—didn't come. Mr. Stoneman, you don't think she's—"

"I don't know," he said heavily, hanging up. But he was going to find out. And just what would he find when he reached San Berdoo if Mary's car had stalled when the fire was coming? He tried to tell himself that Mary was sensible, cool-headed. She always seemed to know just what to do at the right time. And yet if the San Berdoo fire was as much of an inferno as the Santa Monica fire . . .

Stepping from the booth, Stoneman came face to face wtih the sheriff.

"Stoneman," began the sheriff, "how are your hands? I heard you couldn't work anymore but . . ."

"But what?" Stoneman wondered grimly. Inwardly he felt those rebellious flames leaping higher as though to warn him.

The sheriff motioned with a slip of paper.

"We just got word over short-wave radio," he said, "there are some firemen in Santa Ynez Canyon, four miles north of the government rock quarry. The wind is shifting the fire, but they can't see that. They'll be trapped if—"

"You want me to warn them?" Stoneman demanded brusquely. He saw the sheriff glance at his bandaged hands. "Sheriff," he began before realizing what he was saying, "I was going to ask you if I could drive to . . . to . . . ask you if there was anything I could do, like driving a car."

His face felt hot. Mary would understand *if she lived* to learn what he had done.

"I knew I could count on you," said the sheriff. "There's a car outside. Good luck to you, Stoneman."

If Mary lived . . . if Mary lived . . . what about himself? All that counted was Mary. He drove wildly. He didn't care what happened to himself. He didn't want any luck watching over him. He'd get through somehow without it. Let his share of luck, or whatever you want to call it, go to Mary.

The air was acrid as the fire worked down the canyon sides. He had to blink his inflamed eyes to see the blurred road as it swept into the headlights and under the car. Lurid lights danced eerily through the night. Ashes and firebrands fluttered before the car. Thick smoke choked the road.

He found the firemen, about a dozen of them from three different truck and engine companies from Venice. All their attention was concentrated on several houses they were trying to save. Stoneman jumped out of the car and dashed forward.

"You've got to get out of here," he shouted above the roar of flames. "Fire's going to surround you and—"

He paused as men began shouting. The fire *had* surrounded them!

THE road was suddenly a slim gauntlet between towering orange walls. Stoneman saw the whole inside of his car a mass of flames, and suddenly there was fire closing in from all sides.

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"On the road!" a leather-faced fire-captain commanded. "Everyone on the road. Lie down. It's our only chance."

The men flung themselves prostrate. One tried to dash down the canyon. Flames wrapped around one of his legs. Others reared and roared before him. He staggered back, fell, and dragging his leg he crawled weakly to his companions.

Stoneman lay on his stomach on the scorching road.

The white-hot glare of the fire was worse than the most powerful search-light. Peering slightly from under his protecting arms he saw the man lying beside him raise his head. The man's lips moved as though in agony as he suddenly pressed his hands to his eyes.

Stoneman heard no sound except that overwhelming roar. Keeping his own eyes closed he reached out and pushed the man's head down.

He could see the glare even through closed eyes. His breath clogged with furnace-air. Powdery ash sponged all moisture from his nostrils. Smoke and sharp fumes cut like knives. He was choking convulsively. The skin of his whole body crawled with hot pain. He felt his hands swelling with bursting blisters, before he tucked them under him.

"This is it," he thought. "God, make it fast! Give my luck and love to Mary."

But still he remained conscious and the inferno roared. His body was tinder dry, except where it pressed the frying pan of the road. Frying in his own sweat. Minutes were swallowed by Infinity. The relentless heat of Hell was unabated.

The devil shook him by the shoulder.

"All over, Sheriff," someone said in a voice that was just a whispering croak. "Thanks for trying to warn us."

Stoneman rolled over and sat up weakly. Little flames still flickered beside the road. The houses were gone, gaunt blackened chimneys serving as tombstones. The men were a sorry sight. Clothes in smoldering tatters, rubber coats that had melted and now trailed streamers of rubber icicles. Heads horseshoed with singed white hair when helmets were pulled off. Ears swollen with blisters. Eyes as red as flames. Faces looking bald without eyebrows or lashes. Faces baked a fiery red, cracked, peeled, blistered, seared.

Stoneman groped to his feet. The man, who had tried to run out when they were first trapped, had to be carried. The man who had watched the fire until Stoneman stopped him was almost blind and had to be led. The group staggered down the canyon road past the twisted shell of the car Stoneman had driven.

For a time, then, he must have lost consciousness. But when he regained it, he was at a first-aid station with the rest of the men, and he had no memory of how they had reached there.

Someone at a first-aid station was spraying Stoneman with tannic acid. Another was saying there were two thousand men fighting the fire. Four thousand acres, thirty square miles being devastated.

Stoneman heard the sheriff's voice. "I thought you were done for," said the sheriff. "You and the others were trapped in there for *three hours!*"

Stoneman nodded dazedly, and sought words to ask for leave. It couldn't be denied him now.

His hand brushed across his face.

"You'd better go home, Stoneman," advised the sheriff. "I'll get a car to—"

"Stoneman?" a voice inquired. "Where is he?" It was the lanky news photographer. "Say," he said, "I finally got that information you wanted."

Stoneman pushed the forestry medical man away.

"About my wife? Mary?"

The photographer nodded, staring at him. Stoneman braced.

"Let's have it," he said tensely.

"She's still in San Berdoo," informed the photographer.

Stoneman nodded numbly. Inside everything was sinking, pulling him down.

"Wait a minute," called the photographer. "Let me finish. She stayed down there deliberately!"

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The vague focus of Stoneman's gaze was a thin line to which he clung hopefully.

"She . . . stayed . ."

The photographer nodded.

"She's been trying to get in touch with you. She wants you to know she's all right. She's helping the Red Cross take care of the San Berdoo fire-fighters."

That would be just like Mary.

"The car's outside," said the sheriff, reaching out to grasp Stoneman's arm.

Stoneman shook his head. "Just let me get some food, a little sleep. This fire isn't licked yet. There must be something I can still do. My wife's holding up her end of the job. She expects me to do mine here. I can't let her down."

The Great Argosy-Hollywood Sweepstakes

During the past year this magazine and the motion picture industry have been in a furious race to get stories before the public first. Although there was some claim to a photo-finish at the time, we concede that MGM got "Young Doctor Kildare" under the wire just ahead of us. But the heats now stand one to one. By a whisker, we give you FAST AND LOOSE, Marco Page's great new serial, before the film version, co-starring Robert Montgomery and Rosalind Russell, hits the nation's screens.

READ IT FIRST IN ARGOSY THEN SEE IT ON THE SCREEN

FAST AND LOOSE *by MARCO PAGE* BEGINS NEXT WEEK

Find the murderer!

"Find who butchered these thirteen people and you get the badge." That was what **Detective Captain Bixby** told **Hal Fulton**, who had been dishonorably discharged from the Force. **Fulton** wanted that badge—***wanted it badly***—but to get it he had to hunt down a killer who struck without leaving a single clue. **Dale Clark** is the author of this hair-raiser called

The Black Magic "Murders"

Don't miss it or the other chilling mystery tales by top-flight authors in the only weekly magazine of fine detective stories on the market. ***Buy a copy today—read it tonight!***

FEBRUARY 18th ISSUE

DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY

on sale February 8th-15th . . . 10c

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MEN of
HONOR COP
MARTY OWENS WAS ONE NEW YORK KID WHO STUCK TO HIS AMBITION TO BE A COP. AT 22 HE GAVE UP A GOOD JOB TO POUND A PATROLMAN'S BEAT; AND WITHIN FIVE YEARS HE HAD WON THREE CITATIONS. 1911 WAS HIS MEDAL YEAR. HIS HEROIC RESCUE OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM A RAGING TENEMENT FIRE WON HIM THE POLICE HONOR LEGION AWARD; THAT SAME YEAR THE AUTOMOBILE CLUB PINNED ITS MEDAL ON HIM FOR HIS WORK IN ROUNDING UP A GANG OF CAR THIEVES.
DETECTIVE
Marty
Owens
HE MADE AN AMBULANCE HUM!
BECAUSE OF HIS BRAVERY MARTY WAS CHOSEN FROM 700 CANDIDATES TO PILOT AN AMBULANCE GIVEN BY THE NEW YORK POLICE DEPT. TO FRANCE. BEFORE VERDUN EIGHT MEN IN HIS AMBULANCE SECTION WERE KILLED. WHEN TROOPS WERE EVACUATING AND HE WAS ORDERED TO WITHDRAW, MARTY ANSWERED, "I WAS SENT OVER TO GET THE WOUNDED," AND WENT FORWARD!
HE MADE HIS FLIVVER GO PLACES AN AMBULANCE HAD NEVER BEEN BEFORE. THE FRENCH LOVED HIM AND DECORATED MARTY 3 TIMES ON THE FIELD AND MADE HIM A CAPTAIN. LATER, TO TRANSFER TO THE AMERICAN FORCES HE HAD TO LOSE THIS RATING — BUT HE PERFORMED SOME MORE HEROICS AND WAS SOON A MAJOR! ONCE, AMIDST A HAIL OF MACHINE GUN BULLETS HE RESCUED A MAN BETWEEN THE LINES. (GEN. PERSHING DECORATED HIM FOR THIS).

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
AT LAST A SHELL FOUND THE FLIVVER— AND LEFT NOTHING BUT THE PLAQUE! MARTY STILL HAS IT. ALTHOUGH HIT SEVERAL TIMES, THE BIG HANDSOME SOLDIER WAS NEVER SERIOUSLY HURT.
MP
U.S. U.S (1918)
IN 1918 THE VILLAGE OF BELLEVUE WAS A HIDEOUT FOR THE CROOKS, DESERTERS, GUNMEN AND TOUGH GUYS FROM THE ALLIED ARMIES. NO AUTHORITIES COULD HANDLE THEM. THEN SOMEONE THOUGHT OF MARTY. WITH A FEW PICKED MEN HE SOON CLEANED THEM OUT. THE WAR CROSS AND TWO OTHER MEDALS WERE HIS WHEN THE WAR ENDED.
BACK AT HIS JOB AS A DETECTIVE, HE BECAME A SPECIALIST IN JEWEL ROBBERIES. MARTY BROKE THE CELEBRATED SCHOELKOPF CASE—THEFT OF HALF A MILLION DOLLARS' WORTH OF STONES! HE HAS DEVELOPED AN AMAZING KNACK AT DETECTING INSIDE JOBS, PLANNED TO FLEECE INSURANCE COMPANIES! TODAY HE IS A LIEUTENANT, IN COMMAND OF NEW YORK'S 17TH DETECTIVE SQUAD.

Coming: Emmett Blake—Jungle Expert

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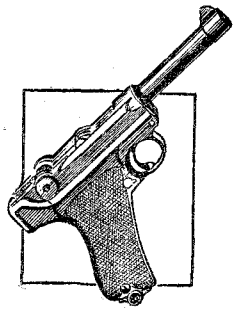
Four Minutes

By R. H. NEWMAN

An Argosy Blue Ribbon Short Short



THE young man took three steps forward. His eyes were on the steeple clock. His brain was counting out the minutes. Rationing out time to his body, time for action. All right now, he kept telling himself, all right, steady now, you'll see him in exactly fifteen seconds.

Ten steps more brought the young man to the corner and he could see the street stretching silent and empty, and at the end of the street, the man. His man. . . . Long-bodied and thin, leaning loosely against the fence post.

At first there was just this thin bumpy line of a man. Black against the last light of the afternoon. But when the young man focused his eyes more strongly, there began to be detail. The hatbrim was sharp, the arm was a curve, and the long overcoat fanned out at the bottom where the trousers began.

The young man raised his eyes up along this line, straight up the man's back. And then he saw something that made him curse inside himself.

The man's collar was pulled up to his ears. And this made the young man have one of those split-second qualms when a man goes all sick with fear and doubt just before he's going to pull off something big. He hadn't counted on that extra thickness. He'd counted on skin and flesh and tissue and bone, but not on that layer of cloth. He should have loaded the gun with soft-nosed bullets. He told himself that now. Soft-nosed bullets which would flatten out when they hit. Which would flatten out even more if you greased them and cut a cross into the lead. If he'd done that, he wouldn't have to worry that the cloth might make a difference, or that the man might have a chain inside the collar to hang the coat by, a chain that might turn the bullet from going straight. He wouldn't have to worry because the soft-nosed, lead bullet would tear a hole as big as a fist in the back of the man's neck. And if the bullet went in a little above or a little below the groove where a man's hair line ends, it wouldn't matter one bit. While he thought these things, the young man prayed that his hand wouldn't tremble. There was no telling what his hand might do. He knew that now. This was so different from shooting birds or deer or moose. It was different from shooting bear even.

He stared straight ahead at the tall man. What if he moved or changed his position? What if he turned around? Should he take a quick chance at shooting and running? Should he risk missing a hit? And the noise!

No, he couldn't afford to have that man move an inch. He must stand there silently and face away until the factory whistles began to blow. And that wouldn't happen for another four minutes. The young man was sure of that, but he looked up at the clock anyway. Yes, four minutes. On the dot.

The air was still and it was heavy with too much color. Night was licking down. It pasted shadows to the houses along the street. That too made a risk. Bad light. But the young man was an excellent shot.

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He gave himself ninety chances out of one hundred. The same percentage as when he crossed the street or took a bath. He told himself these things and it made him feel better. But it didn't do away with the dryness on the roof of his mouth, or the feeling that his stomach was hanging by a thread.

THREE minutes more. He felt his hate for the other one curl and boil hot in his chest. Look at the way he stood there motionless. He might already be dead. What if he was? What if someone else had come along and had the pleasure of firing a slug into the back of the man's head. When a man was such a brute and so many hated him, there was always that chance. And, because the young man had forgotten all that had gone before, he wondered would the pawn shop take back the gun, and refund him his money. Would it be a good enough reason that someone else had pulled off the killing?

But an instant later he had to drive the thought from his mind. He knew he had no time left for wondering now.

Two minutes left. Time to start moving. Thirty steps. A pity that he couldn't allow himself a better shot than that. But even in this almost darkness he had faith in his shooting. He began to walk. Very slowly. His hand was clutched deep in his pocket. He felt that he was alone with the other man in a place where no one had ever gone before them. A place without echoes or thoughts or memories. A place dark with hate and terror.

He kept moving forward. He was sure of his spacing. He'd paced the distance so many times. So he moved forward carefully and balanced and with cruel exactness. Like a big cat. Only instead of claws, he had a gun.

One minute. He was holding his breath now. And in his brain something was screaming at the other man not to move. Like a whip this howling thing stung the edges of his mind. Ten more steps. One, two, three; he could feel the muscles tightening and bunching in his legs. He wondered would anyone hear the shot. And, if they did hear it, what would they say, these safe smiling people in the houses? A backfire? A cap pistol? A burst electric bulb? Five steps, six steps, seven steps, for a moment he thought his legs would buckle. A great force churned through his stomach. The breath gasped in his throat. Eight steps, nine, ten steps, blood pounded and his tongue clogged his mouth. It seemed he would never again get all the air he needed.

Then the whistles began to shriek. Like tremendous brass nails they drove the air apart.

The young man tore his hand from his pocket, and he heard the cloth rip as he did. He tensed his arm straight before him. His eyes strained ahead at the back of the tall man's neck. Now, now, now, the thing in his brain howled out. He tautened his finger.

But nothing happened. No shot, no anything.

And the falling apart all over his body made him know that something had gone wrong. Something hadn't clicked. His eyes began to hurt him, and he made little whimpering sounds. He stared at his hand. It was empty. There was no gun. . .

Then dully it all came back to him, what had gone before. He remembered the thing that he'd forgotten. And he felt very tired.

"That's it," he muttered.

He turned to the men behind him. Now that he remembered this other thing, he knew they were there.

"That's it," he repeated, "that's how I did it."

And he held his hands out wearily so that the detectives could put the handcuffs back around his wrists. He wanted to laugh when he saw the tall policeman coming toward him. He wanted to laugh because it was all so much like a part of a ghost story. But the laugh wouldn't come.

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There were two men guarding the Big Shot's door, ready to shoot

Help! Murder! Police!

By CLEVE F. ADAMS

DETECTIVE-LIEUTENANT JOHN J. SHANNON'S firm conviction that the murder of his friend and superior, Captain Goudy, is not as open-and-shut a case as it looks, leads him into what even he has to call serious trouble.

Goudy's body was found with a five-thousand-dollar check signed by the gambler, Floyd Duquesne, in his pocket. The bullet in his chest came from Duquesne's gun. The implication was that Goudy had been taking bribes from the gambler, Duquesne, and that Duquesne had shot him.

But Shannon knew Duquesne for a square-shooter and stubbornly denied that Goudy would touch a dirty penny. So he set out to solve the riddle for himself, believing that the frameup was an attempt on the part of Nick Lombardi to discredit the city administration and put his own men into office at the approaching municipal election.

THE intricate trail of corruption and violence leads Shannon down a blind alley that is choked with danger and dishonor. Acting-chief of Detectives O'Meara demands his badge, claiming that Shannon and Duquesne's lawyer, Ward Duffield, had helped Duquesne to escape.

The pay-to-bearer check that Duquesne had put through the Third National a few days before Goudy's death proves worthless as a clue when the teller who cashed it vanishes. Chief of Police Regan has kept curiously mum in Miami where he is attending a police chiefs' convention. And timid Mayor Arbogast admits he is powerless.

Shannon discovers that the bank teller was in debt to Tex Boyer, who runs the Ticker Club for Lombardi. Shannon goes to Boyer to make him admit the truth. While he is there Boyer is shot in the back and the killing is pinned on Shannon.

The first installment of this three-part serial, herein concluded, was published in the Argosy for February 4

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Shannon is forced into hiding; he has only three friends left—Frances McGowan, his girl, Gus Vogel, his partner on the force, and a taxi-driver named Osterwicz, whose gratitude to Shannon for kicking him in the stomach and thus showing him the error of his ways is inexhaustible.

When Lombardi kidnaps Frances in an attempt to force Shannon to find the missing Duquesne and to turn over to him "the stuff that Goudy was killed for," Shannon fights fire with fire. He goes to the school where Lombardi's daughter is enrolled and holds her prisoner at the point of the gun until he hears that Frances is safe.

As he is leaving the school grounds one of Lombardi's men fires at him. Shannon shoots him down. . . .

CHAPTER XI

WITHOUT A GUN

IT WAS a small house, on a street of small houses, yet there was beauty in the street, a certain quiet dignity about the houses. These, you felt, were something more than mediocre five-room bungalows; they were homes. The people who lived here probably never worried the U. S. treasury over income tax evasions, but they were a definite asset to the community. Late afternoon sunshine filtered through overhanging pepper trees. At one end of the block a group of kids were playing cops-and-robbers, with no thought, apparently, that one of their adult neighbors was lying dead through having played the same game too seriously.

Shannon got out of the cab at the far corner, walked quietly down the side street and turned into an unpaved alley.

Little noises came to him from the kitchens of the houses he passed, the preparation of early suppers, no doubt, but no one came out to ask him his business. He halted at the little gate in the shoulder-high hedge, looking at the tiny garden patch his skipper had tended with his own hands.

He was very glad that Mrs. Goudy had preceded her husband into the unknown.

Presently Shannon let himself through the gate and crossed the yard, more swiftly now, until he was hidden by the screen porch. It was so quiet here that it almost hurt his ears. The back door had been jimmied open. It swung loosely on it hinges as Shannon touched it. He went into the kitchen. The place was a shambles. Even the flour and sugar and coffee canisters had been upended, dumped carelessly on the sink board. Shannon made sibilant little sounds with his mouth.

In the living room, pictures hung awry on the walls, and some of them had even had their backs removed. A twenty-year old photograph of the skipper himself lay on the floor, its protecting glass shattered by some vandal heel.

Shannon picked it up, looked at it. The eyes seemed a little reproachful. Shannon said. "Hell, I'm still trying, ain't I?" He shook the likeness. "You had something, guy. What was it? Where is it?"

He put the photograph on the table, sat down in a chair almost denuded of upholstery. It didn't seem particularly important who had ravished the house, whether it was Lombardi's hoods or O'Meara's dicks. O'Meara could have done it for perfectly legitimate reasons. But regardless of who was responsible it was almost certain that the thing itself, whatever it was, hadn't been found. Or had it? Not by Lombardi at least, Shannon decided. Witness Lombardi's action in trying to force Shannon to help him get it.

There was the other thing Lombardi had wanted, too. He'd wanted Shannon to turn up Floyd Duquesne.

Assuming that Lombardi had engineered the jail break for the purpose of clinching the skipper's kill on the gambler, the plan had gone haywire. Duquesne had got away. Where was he now? What was the purpose of ignoring Duquesne's brother, Ward Duffield? Shannon thought a little about the gray man with the club foot. For all his reputation and known sagacity the attorney hadn't been able to accomplish any more than Shannon. It all seemed to hinge on this unknown thing that had been in Captain Goudy's possession.

Evidence, surely. But evidence of what? Against whom?

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Goudy's killing had not been premeditated; of that Shannon was by this time almost sure. The skipper had been found in an alley, with one exploded shell in his gun. Therefore he had fired at the guy who had shot him. But there was no assurance that, because he had been found in the alley, he had been killed there. Say he had had the dope on somebody, had made an accusation. The somebody had gone for a gun, shots had been exchanged, the skipper had been the unlucky one. If you believed the evidence of the check and the gun, this unknown was Floyd Duquesne. If you didn't believe this, then it must have been somebody who had access to the check and the gun, and the two were later used to frame Duquesne. Any way you figured it, the frame of Floyd Duquesne was just a side play; an afterthought. A thorn in Lombardi's side, he still wasn't big enough to make necessary the skipper's murder.

SHANNON shrugged irritably. He'd been over this before without accomplishing anything. Why do it again? He got up and wandered through the two bedrooms, trying, like a medium in a trance, for an impression; a message from a dead man through association with the dead man's possessions.

It came to him presently that he still hadn't resolved the problem into its essentials. Who stood to gain by the recent chain of events?

Mayor Arbogast? The killing of Captain Goudy and his exposure—real or faked—certainly hadn't advanced the cause of the incumbent mayor. Rather, it had cast a cloud over the mayor's own reputation, because it was known that he and the skipper had been friendly.

Big Nick Lombardi? Well, it was true that Lombardi would have profited to the extent of ridding himself of an annoyance in the person of Floyd Duquesne, a competitor in the gambling field. But it was rather a devious way, and an uncertain bludgeon at best with which to swing Mayor Arbogast into line.

A logical conclusion was that Nick Lombardi would rather have a half-broken horse in office than take his chances with an entirely new one. His votes, while perhaps they couldn't actually swing the election, would certainly be a tremendous influence. Therefore it stood to reason that if the opposition could guarantee him more than Arbogast had delivered, all he had to do was elect the opposition. Obviously, then, the opposition wasn't as amenable to reason as Lombardi had hoped. So the big guy's next best bet was to keep Arbogast, but to so thoroughly scare him that he'd promise anything. Arbogast was scared, all right. Ward Duffield had said so.

Shannon wrinkled his brows in painful concentration. So what?

Was Acting-chief O'Meara on Lombardi's side? Or was he acting independently, solely in the interest of George O'Meara?

That brought the absent Chief Regan back into the picture. Would Regan arrive tonight, or wouldn't he? And if he did, how would his presence affect the situation? He would supersede O'Meara, at least temporarily, and O'Meara might not like this. He might like it so little, indeed, that he would take steps to see that Regan never did arrive. Same with Nick Lombardi. Mayor Arbogast was an uncertain quantity.

District Attorney Jorgensen was so firmly entrenched that all he had to do was sit on the sidelines and snipe at whoever stuck his head up. Shannon dismissed the D.A. as having nothing to lose.

Floyd Duquesne was out to get the guy or guys who had framed him into a murder rap. His brother, instead of being, as Shannon had hoped, a help, was nothing but another interested spectator. This was partially Shannon's own fault, he realized. He was kept from aligning himself with Ward Duffield because of the murder rap against himself. And there, come to think of it, was another funny thing.

Who had shot Tex Boyer? Not Lombardi, surely. It would have been easier to shoot Shannon. Captain O'Meara? Why

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should he? Where was the motive? It was a crazy thing to do, and as Shannon thought of the word *crazy* he thought of a white-haired woman in a quietly refined boarding house, and of her son, a bank teller named Frank Little.

He didn't know why he should have thought of them. Perhaps it was the kid's photograph, straight-looking eyes staring out of a sensitive face. That kind of kid might go off his nut, given the right provocation. Maybe he'd gotten loose from Lombardi; maybe Lombardi had never picked him up. Maybe Floyd Duquesne had shot Boyer. He was another guy who had a good reason, though the method, the time and the place, didn't seem to fit Duquesne.

Cursing half-heartedly, because he could just as well have done all this screw-pot reasoning in another place, and it certainly wasn't conducive to spirit-message reception, Shannon opened a closet door.

The guy inside the closet hit him with something so hard and so heavy that Shannon had only a blurred impression of the descending arm.

He went down like a poled ox.

Stunned, unable to see, he was still not so completely out that he couldn't feel it when the guy stepped on his chest. His flailing right fist closed on an ankle, closed hard, and he tried to get his eyes open so he could see what he'd caught, but before he could manage this last the guy kicked him in the chin. Shannon really went bye-bye this time.

HE DIDN'T know any more till he discovered Osterwicz, the hacker, trying to unscrew his head from his shoulders. Osterwicz was astraddle Shannon's chest, one hand on either side of Shannon's jaw and he was really working very hard at his idea of resuscitation. Relief flooded his face as Shannon's eyes came open.

"Hully gee, I thought you was dead!"

"You were certainly doing your best," Shannon grumbled. "Would you mind getting off me now, pal?"

Osterwicz got off. Shannon, forgetting that he had only one arm available, tried to use both to pry himself up and fell flat on his face. Osterwicz stooped and hauled him into a chair. "Tough guy, hunh?" he sneered ."How many was there?"

"Just one."

"Only one? And you let him take you like that? Chief, I'm beginning to lose my faith in you. Maybe it was an accident after all, your clunking me that time on accounta my wife. Now look, tell me straight, chief—"

"Shut up!" Shannon said. He was trying to think, but thinking had been tough enough before. Now, with a head on him like a balloon, it was practically impossible. He looked at Osterwicz. "What brought you in so opportunely?"

"Well, I got tired of waiting for you, kind of, and so I just come in."

"You didn't see this party I was telling you about?"

"Well, you ain't been telling me much about him, chief, and that's a fact. What'd he look like?"

"Let it pass," Shannon groaned. "Just put it this way: Did you or did you not see anybody run out of this house?"

"No."

"Well, I certainly couldn't ask for a more direct answer than that. Nor one more useless." Shannon got to his feet, went into the bath and doused his face with cold water. Toweling, he regarded his reflection in the mirror.

In spite of all he'd gone through he still looked like John J. Shannon. He couldn't understand it.

As he was combing his hair, the hacker came in with a bottle. They had a drink. Then they had another.

Shannon began to feel better. Nothing had been proved by the encounter; on the other hand, nothing had been disproved. So he hadn't really lost anything. The guy hadn't even taken his gun. It was specious reasoning, on the face of it, but it served to restore a modicum of Shannon's self-respect.

One thing had been established, any-

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way. The guy hadn't tried to kill; all he'd wanted was to get away. There was a little quirk in this that eluded Shannon's mental groping. He filed it away for future reference.

Osterwicz, refreshed no end by the contents of the bottle, announced happily that he was ready to go if Shannon was.

They went out and got in the cab. "Where to, chief?"

Shannon gave him the address of Frank Little, the bank teller. They drove out there. Traffic had thickened, three lanes outbound, only one inbound. Lights were beginning to come on in the stores, though it wasn't completely dark. The clock on the dash said five-thirty.

Turning right from the crush of the boulevard into the quiet backwater of the Littles' street Shannon cursed suddenly. There was a car parked halfway down the block. Not that there weren't other cars too, but this one stood out to the eyes of an experienced copper. For one thing, there aren't many phaetons being driven any more. Those that are don't usually have their curtains up in dry weather.

Shannon said, "Take it easy, but don't stop. Go on around the block."

He slid deep into his seat, eyes just above the sill of the quarter-window. There were three men in the phaeton. One of them was the saturnine Sticky, the gun who worked for Big Nick Lombardi. The one who wanted some day to horse a plane around the sky. There wasn't much doubt which house the three guys were watching.

On the next block over Shannon found that the two streets and the boulevard made a sort of triangle, narrowing down to a point where it was no longer possible to get two full-depth lots back to back.

The Little lot ran clear through, though there was no rear entrance. The garages were flanked by a lattice-work rose trellis.

Shannon had to get Osterwicz to help him spring one edge of the trellis free, so that he could get through. He crossed the lot to the back porch, nibbling at a rose thorn in his thumb.

MATILDA, the colored maid, opened the door. Immediately she recognized Shannon she tried to close it again. He stuck his foot in the opening. "So he's here, hunh?"

"Who?" Her ebony face had turned the color of putty. She started a scream as she saw Shannon was coming in, choked it off when he grabbed her arm.

"Don't do it, baby," he advised. "Maybe you and his mother don't want him pinched, but believe me a pinch is better than a gunning. That's what he'll get if you scare him out the front door."

Her eyes rolled up in her head till only the whites showed. Shannon saw she had fainted and let her drop. He went quietly up the hall and began climbing the stairs. Somewhere above him a woman sobbed quietly. He followed the sound to an open bedroom door.

It was Frank Little's room.

He just stood there in the doorway for a moment. For the first time in his life he felt the need of someone, Frances McGowan preferably.

In his time he had dragged plenty of sons away from their mothers, but in most cases the sons had been rats and the mothers not much better. This pair was different. They had breeding and education, and for people like that the going was always tougher. The kid was in a chair, his mother on her knees beside him, trying to bandage his arm and not making a very good job of it because she was crying and couldn't see very well. There was blood all over the kid's shirt, which lay on the floor.

Shannon went in. "Don't get up, Mrs. Little."

She sat perfectly still, not even turning her head. The kid stared at Shannon over her bowed shoulder. "Who are you?"

"Name of Shannon, son. I'm a cop. I was here before, only you weren't in. You were downtown, shooting a guy that no doubt needed shooting, but it made it a little tough on me. So I came back."

The kid ran a tongue over dry lips. "How do you know?"

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Shannon let his eyes rest on the bloody shirt. "I suspect it was my slug that potted you, there on the fire escape. Funny how things work out, isn't it?"

Mrs. Little got slowly to her feet. "Funny! Do you call it funny when—when a city is so corrupt that things like this can happen to decent people?" She pointed a finger at Shannon. "It's your kind that makes these things possible; that permits gambling and vice to flourish. Is it his fault that he's where he is?" She covered her face suddenly. "Oh, my God!"

Shannon touched her gently.

"Police departments are just like any other group of men, ma'am. Putting a uniform on a guy, or giving him a badge, don't change him inside. I wish it did, just as much as you, but it don't. So all we can do is make the best of things as they are."

There was more of it; quite a lot. His voice droned on and on and presently it had its effect. The woman quieted.

The kid looked helplessly at his mother, looked without a great deal of resentment at Shannon. "You—you said 'make the best of things as they are.' I'd like to make it easier for mother, is all."

"So would I," Shannon said sincerely. He went over and stood the kid on his feet. "I can't promise you much, but if you and your mother will go down to the end of the hall I'll show you what I mean by making the best of things."

They went down the unlighted hall to a window overlooking the street. "There's a car out there," Shannon said. "A black phaeton with three men in it. Even if I were a cop in good standing I couldn't do much to them for just sitting there, but you and I know what they're there for. They can't make up their minds whether you're home or not. After a while they may decide to come in after you. I'm offering you a better chance than that."

Mrs. Little drew a ragged breath. "Is there a chance that—that if Frank goes with you, something can be done about things like that?"

Shannon inclined his head. "A good chance, ma'am. Frank will probably have to take a rap of some kind, but even that is better than being found in a gutter some place. I can get him Ward Duffield as counsel, and if he tells a straight story he'll get all the breaks possible. Beyond that I can't promise anything definite."

She looked at him. "You—you don't bear my son any malice for what he did to you? I mean—"

"That I'm accused of the killing that he did?" Shannon laughed shortly. "Hell, ma'am, we all do screwy things at one time or another."

The three of them went back to the kid's room. Shannon had never taken his gun out once during the interview.

CHAPTER XII

TAKE A CALL, LADY

CAPTAIN O'MEARA was in Chief Regan's office. He was sitting at Regan's desk as though it had become permanently his, and his captain's uniform shone from a recent pressing. His olive face looked tired, though.

Shannon and the kid, Frank Little, sat in chairs facing the desk, each with an arm in a sling, otherwise totally unlike. Ward Duffield's club foot made little clumping sounds on the floor as he roved about the big room. Jack Hardy of the *Telegram* sat on a leather couch and smoked incessantly. The presence of Hardy and Duffield was Shannon's idea.

O'Meara toyed with the leaden pellet they had taken out of the kid's arm. Shannon's gun, the one he had dropped in Tex Boyer's office, also lay on the desk. It had only been fired once.

Jack Hardy coughed on a mouthful of smoke. "Well, what are we waiting for? An exclusive isn't going to do me much good unless I get it in time for the run."

Shannon looked at the kid. "Tell it, son. Tell it in your own words, so they won't think I've coached you."

O'Meara said, "That wasn't necessary, Shannon. The slug and the gun just about clear you. I couldn't do anything about it even if I wanted to."

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Shannon flushed uncomfortably. A lot of this had been his own fault, but, being Shannon, he hated to admit it. Besides, he still wasn't sure of O'Meara. The guy hadn't switched the slugs in the Captain Goudy kill; perhaps he'd been acting in good faith, arresting Floyd Duquesne. But there was no assurance that he wasn't taking Lombardi's money for other things.

The kid began in a low voice. "Tex Boyer had me in a spot. He was into me for a couple of grand, money he knew I couldn't have saved out of my salary. He began pressing me and finally I had to tell him the dough was coming out of the bank. I was pretty desperate. When he had me on the ragged edge he threatened to suggest an investigation at the bank."

Ward Duffield said, "You don't have to tell this, you know."

"That's *your* story!" Shannon said. "Go on, kid."

The boy went on: "Boyer wanted me to get hold of one of Duquesne's checks. He said it was to be used to run Duquesne out of business. He didn't tell me about—about killing anybody So I got the check, called him and he came down and left cash in exchange for the check."

"Just a minute," O'Meara interrupted. "As I understand it, all your dealings were with Boyer? You saw nothing of Big Nick Lombardi?"

"No."

Shannon yelled, "We all know that the big guy was behind Boyer!"

O'Meara gave him a level stare. "Knowing it and proving it are two different things, Shannon. One thing you did succeed in doing—you busted the Ticker Club out into the open. But Lombardi only shows as the owner of the building. I doubt if we could hang him for that."

"But he admitted to me that—"

"Can you prove it?"

Shannon shut his lips on a hot retort. "Go ahead, kid."

THE boy's mouth twisted in a bitter grimace. "I was a sap. Boyer promised to square me at the bank and I believed him. Instead of squaring me he gave me a hundred dollars and told me I'd better leave town. Well, I almost went screwy right then, but he finally convinced me there was nothing I could do. I couldn't prove he'd got the check without admitting I was a party to it; maybe not even then.

"My shortage was bound to show up pretty soon, even if he didn't drop the hint he threatened. I told him I'd lam. But I didn't. I hung on for a few days more, hoping something would turn up. Then I saw where that—that police captain had been killed, and what the check had been used for, and I guess I went off my nut. I couldn't think of anything but getting Boyer.

"I walked the streets all last night and most of the morning. Finally I remembered the fire escape outside his office. I had a gun, because I'd thought once of committing suicide. I went up, and there he was, with his back so close I could touch him. I could hear him talking to someone, I didn't know whom.

"All I knew was that he was there, right under my gun, and I blamed him for everything that had happened. I shot him." He sagged in his chair, closing his eyes, glad that it was all over at last.

O'Meara looked at Shannon. "All right, your slug went through the slit in the drapes and plugged the kid. Then what? Why'd he go home? How did you know it was him?"

"I just thought it might be," Shannon said. "I tried to pin it on Lombardi, on you, even on Duquesne. It seemed to me that any one of you, even if you had a motive, would have had more sense than to go up that fire escape in broad daylight. At first I thought Lombardi"—he paused, staring at O'Meara—"well, if you don't like Lombardi's name in this let's just call him 'somebody'. I thought that *somebody* would have taken the kid for a ride by that time.

"Then I thought that maybe they hadn't, or maybe he'd got away like Floyd Duquesne did. I'd seen the kid's room, seen

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his picture, and he looked like the kind that breaks under pressure. And after he'd broken I figured he'd need his mother. So I went up."

Jack Hardy leaped to his feet. "That was smart work, Shannon!"

"Well," Shannon said, "it was smarter work than you or Vogel or O'Meara did. You let one of Lombardi's"—again he looked at O'Meara—"pardon me, one of Boyer's hired help get away with the spent slug that went clear through Boyer."

O'Meara put his hard eyes on Shannon. "You've got a nasty streak in you somewhere, Irish. You've thrown a lot of innuendos around—yes, and a lot of direct accusations. Before witnesses I'm willing to admit that I've made mistakes. You're in the clear on Boyer's murder. You can have your badge back if you want it. But I can't have you running around shooting off your mouth and making me out a heel. I *won't* have it."

Shannon got up and leaned on the desk. He was a fool and he knew it, but he had a stubborn streak in him. "You can keep the lousy badge, O'Meara. I'm still looking for the guy that killed my skipper." He pushed his broken arm out in front of him. "Yes, and the guy that gave me this."

"You haven't submitted anything to prove that it wasn't Floyd Duquesne."

"The skipper, maybe," Shannon said. "Not the arm. Floyd Duquesne was in jail at the time, if you remember. Or had you forgotten?"

O'Meara reddened. "Then who else?"

"For a guess," Shannon said, "I give you Big Nick Lombardi." He didn't really think this any more. He was just baiting O'Meara into some kind of action that would definitely prove or disprove him Lombardi's man. He looked at Ward Duffield. "Do what you can for the kid, will you? His story itself ought to be almost enough, don't you think?"

Duffield nodded. "I've had worse cases."

"Yes, and beaten them!" Jack Hardy chortled. "Boy, oh, boy, let me at that door!" He clattered out.

GUS VOGEL waddled in on the echo. He took off his derby, looked in it, didn't find anything and looked at Shannon. "Hello, John J. I hear you ain't a murderer no more."

"I've reformed."

Vogel's eyes widened in surprise. "Is that a fact!"

Shannon looked at O'Meara, looked at Duffield, finally went over and laid his good hand on the kid's shoulder. "Take a brace, fella. I'll be seeing you." He then took Gus Vogel by the arm and led him out into the corridor. "What did you do with the dame?"

"With Miss McGowan, you mean?"

"Who else, dummy?"

Vogel fidgeted. "Well, now, Miss McGowan is in jail."

"The hell she is! What for?"

"Well, now, look, you told me to put her in a safe place. There ain't no safer place than jail, is there?"

Frances was in one of the nice new detention cells. She was working on a hooked rug begun by a former inmate. Shannon peered at her through the bars. "What are you in for, pal?"

"I dunno. I think I'm a vag." She went on poking yarn through the stretched burlap. The matron looked disapprovingly from Gus Vogel to Shannon.

Shannon said ingratiatingly, "You hungry, pal?"

"I could eat."

"Then let's all eat," Shannon suggested. He looked at the matron. "Send out for some steaks and things, hunh, Jeep? Charge it to Vogel."

Vogel poked a plump finger through the bars. "You mean in there?"

"Where else? If it's safe for Miss McGowan it's safe for us, isn't it? Besides, we've got to question the prisoner." Shannon stood aside for the matron to unlock the door. They went inside. Jeep went away, presumably to send out for the steaks and things.

Frances stood up. "I've stood a lot from you, John J. Shannon, but never anything like this!"

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"Now look, kitten, was it my idea? Didn't I tell Gus to see you to a nice safe place? Is it my fault if he's too literal? Not," he added, "that our jails are the safest places in the world lately. Look at Duquesne."

Frances suddenly buried her face against his chest. "Oh, Shan, I've been worried to death about you. What's happened?"

He told her. Vogel clucked in dismay. "You mean you'd have actually shot Lombardi's kid?"

Shannon's eyes had a hard, reckless light in them. "You're right I would have!"

Vogel quit being a clown. "All right," he said, staring with suddenly direct blue eyes at Frances, "maybe now you'll talk. Who were these hoods that picked you up?"

"I told you. They were a couple of Hindus with turbans, and they were driving a red-and-blue striped car."

Shannon said gently. "You don't have to lie now, pet. Things have changed a little. It would help, maybe, if you'd tell us what you know. You see Lombardi at any time?"

"No." Her eyes were tragic. "I'm sorry, Shan, but I scarcely saw the man until they were ready to release me. They turned me loose outside here, told me to see Vogel. They said you wanted me to see him. By the time I got the blindfold off they were practically out of sight."

Vogel said, "We'll go down and look at the picture books after a while."

"I've got a better way than that," Shannon said, "I'll take care of it, Gus." He was smiling a little, but it wasn't exactly a pleasant smile. Jeep, the matron, pushed a loaded mobile table through the door.

"This is very unusual, I must say!"

"But isn't it cozy!" Frances jeered. "Like the bear pit in the zoo." She attacked her steak.

After a while the matron came back leading Ward Duffield. Shannon got up, wiping his mouth, and went close to the bars. He kept his voice down to a whisper. "You hear any more from Floyd?"

"Not a word," the gray man said.

"Lombardi hasn't got him. At least he didn't have when I was up there. Lombardi wanted me to finger him."

"Would you have?"

Shannon nodded. "I think so. I'm not sure."

"What do you hear from Chief Regan?"

Shannon hauled out his watch. It was nearly eight o'clock. "If he got my message he'll probably be in on the ten o'clock plane from the East." He turned to Vogel. "Any word from Regan?"

"He's coming in. He wired from Las Vegas."

"I'll meet him out at the airport," Shannon said. He watched Duffield limp away on his club foot, then turned and finished up his meal.

He felt pretty good.

CHAPTER XIII

GAME PLAYED WITH LEAD

SHANNON often marveled at the speed with which news hit the streets. He stood in an ell of the great stone steps leading up to City Hall and shook out a limp copy of the *Telegram*. Shannon himself had made the headlines this time. He was exonerated of the killing of Tex Boyer and would probably be reinstated as lieutenant of detectives.

Mayor Arbogast said: "It's simply wonderful. I've always liked Lieutenant Shannon."

Shannon grunted.

District Attorney Jorgensen: "I shall, of course, have to prosecute Frank Little. I only wish I were able to prosecute those forces existing in this city which make cases like his possible."

Shannon blew a kiss at the county courthouse. Jorgensen had his offices there.

Captain George O'Meara: "Chief Regan is returning to his office tonight. Pending his arrival I have nothing to say." You felt that Regan would have done well to stay away.

There was no mention whatever of Nick Lombardi. Apparently he was just one of

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those unfortunate landlords whose tenants turn out to be wolves in sheep's clothing. Shannon crumpled the paper and threw it away, went into the domed foyer of City Hall and shut himself up in a phone booth.

He spent considerable time and money calling different airports. His last call, long distance, he had to have charged to his own phone account because he ran out of quarters.

When he came out of the booth he was sweating. He went up to the mayor's office.

There was quite a crowd around, the same as last night, though Big Nick Lombardi and Sticky and Sour-puss were conspicuously absent. Sour-puss, indeed, would probably be absent for a long time, Shannon having shot him cold that afternoon out in front of St. Catherine's School.

Seven stenographers were busy pounding out Mayor Arbogast's last pre-election speech. Shannon looked over the shoulder of one of them. "Pap!" he sneered. The harried-looking secretary popped out of the mayor's door. "Please don't interrupt the girls!" she snapped. Then, recognizing Shannon: "Oh, it's you!"

"Up jump de debbil," Shannon grinned. He jerked his head toward the closed door. "You want to announce me, or shall I just walk in?"

Angry color flooded her face. "His Honor is very busy. He goes on the air in half an hour." She took a bunched sheaf of manuscript from one of the seven girls. Shannon relieved her of it. "I'll give it to him." He opened the door, banged it closed behind him, leaned his back against it.

Arbogast, busy rehearsing script behind his too-big desk, looked up, startled. "Oh, hello, Shannon."

Shannon's lip curled. "So it's simply wonderful, is it? You've always liked me, have you?"

Light glinted frostily on Arbogast's pince-nez. Thin lips under close-clipped sandy mustache compressed in a tight, stubborn line. "I don't like your tone, Shannon."

Shannon looked down at the typewritten sheets in his hand. "You're intending to make this speech tonight?"

"Certainly."

"It'll be your political death-knell. I told you I was going to bust this town wide open. I'm all set to do it. Tonight. If you've aligned yourself with Lombardi, you'll go down when he does. If you aren't aligned with him, this wishy-washy stuff, this hogwash, will pull you down anyway.

"Don't you know when you're sitting on a volcano? Can't you see that now is the time to come out with some good strong red meat for the voters to sink their teeth in? Tear this thing up and tell the world you aren't Lombardi's man, or anybody's man save your own. Tell 'em you're going to reorganize the police department. Tell 'em anything, but make it strong—and mean it!"

The mayor's hands were trembling. "I wish I could, Shannon."

"Meaning you've thrown in with Lombardi?"

"Meaning he could break me if you're guessing wrong."

"But I'm not guessing wrong!" Shannon yelled. "Look, let me tear this damn thing up and give you a good speech. Then I'll go see Lombardi. I want to see his face, anyway, when he hears you."

Arbogast said quietly, "I'm listening, Shannon." He listened for fifteen minutes straight. When Shannon finally ran out of breath the mayor stood up.

"I'll do it!"

SHANNON mopped sweat from his forehead. "I think I should have been a lawyer." He jammed on his hat, went out the side door, descended to the street and looked around for Osterwicz.

The hacker was munching stolidly on a sandwich. "Where you been, chief?"

"I'm in the laundry business now," Shannon told him. "I've been putting a little starch in a guy's backbone. I hope it don't make him so brittle he breaks himself." Under his breath he added, "And me."

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He made a little prayer, because, while he wouldn't have admitted it to anybody but himself, he was doing a lot of guessing, and, as the mayor had said, the guessing might be wrong. Shannon nudged this thought aside, got in the cab.

"Let's go see Nick Lombardi."

Going into the apartment lobby Shannon saw only five or six casuals. They might be Lombardi's men, they might not. He went directly to the desk. "Get Lombardi on the wire for me."

Presently he heard the big guy's liquid-velvet voice. "Hel-lo, Shannon!"

"The eyes and ears of the world again," Shannon grumbled. "Damned if I know how you do it, but maybe we'll take this place apart some day and find out." He hesitated a moment before he said, "I've got something for you." Lombardi might already have the thing he had bargained with Shannon for. Besides, he no longer had Fran McGowan. There was a chance the big guy might figure Shannon as out for dough, though. In case he didn't have the stuff. Shannon held his breath.

"Come on up, Shannon," the velvet voice invited.

Shannon got in the elevator. No one offered to get in with him. The control was in automatic position. Shannon jabbed the top-floor button, went up. The two guys sitting on either side of Lombardi's door had guns in their laps. They got up without hurry, patted all of Shannon's pockets, lifted his broken arm out of the way and felt behind that, ran their hands down his pants legs, looked in his hat. They didn't find anything. One of them opened the door for him.

He went in.

The big guy was apparently all alone. He reclined on the chaise longue, propped up with pillows. He might have been there all day except for the fact that he was now dressed. He was dressed beautifully. He smelled of lilac vegetal. A remote control radio played martial music, prelude to all political speeches.

Shannon looked around with elaborate concern. "What, no Sticky?"

"Sticky is a very busy man," Lombardi smiled. "In a way he is quite sensitive, too. He feels very badly about what you did to his pal."

"Poor old Sour-puss," Shannon sighed.

Lombardi moved a little among his cushions. Magically there was a gun in his fat hand and he looked at Shannon sleepy-eyed. "No, poor old Shannon." He fondled the gun. "You gave Maria quite a scare today, Mr. Shannon. I do not like that."

"Now look," Shannon said, "I thought we agreed that the two gals canceled each other. Sauce for the goose, eh?" He laughed a little wildly.

Lombardi didn't laugh. "It is you who are the goose, Shannon. You walk in here without a gun. Nick Lombardi has one, no?" He sat erect suddenly, swung thick legs around so that his feet rested on the rug. "You will not walk out, I think. You will be carried out."

"You'd shoot me down just like that, hunh?"

"Just like that," Lombardi agreed. "Men do not play games with Lombardi's girl and live."

"You played games with mine."

Lombardi smiled then. "Ah, but you do not have a gun and I have." He broke off, listening to the radio. The mayor was being introduced.

Shannon led one of his two aces. "You wanted some evidence, Nick. Stuff that Captain Goudy had. You still want it?"

"Meaning you have it?" Lombardi's eyes were suddenly alert, filled with suspicion. Shannon knew then that he had guessed right.

"I can get it."

The big guy smiled. "Then if you can get it, we'll have no trouble finding it—after you're gone." He listened to the mayor. Quite suddenly his face went white and flaccid, and his eyes became mere pinpoints in the rolls of flesh. The eyes settled definitely on Shannon's face. "So—you know!"

"Yes," Shannon said, "I know."

Lombardi's trigger-finger contracted.

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Shannon overturned a table in the path of the first slug, dropped to the floor as two more slugs spatted into the mahogany. Echoes boomed and billowed around the room.

Shannon got the gun from where he had hidden it in his arm sling, jackknifed out from behind the table and put two quick slugs into Lombardi's chest.

Lombardi slid off the chaise longue, a sodden mass of flesh, inert. Foam bloodied his mouth, but his eyes still lived, he still clutched the gun. On his belly, he jacked his gun wrist up with his left hand.

Shannon kicked at him just as the door crashed in. Lombardi's slug dropped one of his own hoods instead of Shannon. Shannon shot the other one. Lombardi died. The beautiful room no longer smelled of lilac vegetal. It smelled of cordite.

It was as though the big guy, dying, had taken all of the perfume in the world with him.

The mayor's radio speech ended. "Lombardi must go!" The mayor didn't know that Lombardi had already gone.

CHAPTER XIV

MEET THE CHIEF

SHANNON was about thirty seconds too late to stop the thing. Maybe he couldn't have stopped it anyway. He hadn't anticipated such a crowd at the airport, hadn't realized that the mayor's speech, threatening to clean up the police department, would send a mob out to see the man who headed that department, when he came in.

The administration building was jammed. So were the steps outside, giving on the ramp, and the long promenade.

Shannon was at the port in time to hear the big ship come in, but the crowd slowed him. He was still on the steps, looking down at the exit from the field, when he saw Floyd Duquesne. Duquesne was hatless, easily recognizable, even in a crowd, because of his height.

Shannon started plowing through a sea of softly resistant bodies. He was less than ten feet away when he saw Sticky, Lombardi's gunman, between him and Duquesne. Then everything seemed to happen all at once.

It was perfectly clear when you had all the actors spotted, like a slow-motion picture, or a dream in which you can see what's going on with crystal clarity, but are powerless to interfere because of paralysis.

Chief Regan descended from the plane with a bulging suitcase in his hand. Floyd Duquesne's hand came out of the crowd with a gun in it. There was a little puff of smoke from the gun muzzle. Chief Regan staggered, went down.

Sticky shot Floyd Duquesne in the back of the head.

Shannon's breath sobbed in his throat as he hurled himself into the crush. Gun out, eyes hot with anger, he met Sticky chest to chest. He shot Sticky three times in the stomach, once in the throat, before he actually knew he had done it.

People fell away from him like an ebb tide flowing out through a fissure. The screaming of women made the night hideous. Shannon ran out onto the field where men bent over Chief Regan. Sirens added their din to the screaming of the women. Regan climbed shakily to his feet.

Shannon yelled, "Where you hit?"

Regan recognized him. "Hello, boy. I'm not hit any place."

"Huh?"

Regan shook his head. "Fact. It was the suitcase that got it. Knocked me off my pins and I bumped my head." He
at the ship's crew. "Thanks a lot
He took Shannon's arm, st
him toward the exit. A fl
bulls were beating the crowd
see who did it, boy?"

Shannon nodded. "Floyd

"But why?"

"Maybe he didn't
offered.

Regan looked
get him?"

"Another
other

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his pocket. It took them ten minutes to explain all this to the harness bulls. They went out and got in a cab and went down to headquarters.

CAPTAIN O'MEARA was in Chief Regan's office. So was Mayor Arbogast. It looked as though they'd been having a hot session. O'Meara got out of Regan's chair a little shamefacedly.

"Hello, Regan. Have a nice trip?"

"Just fine," Regan said. "Fine." He rubbed his hands together, looking beamingly at Shannon. "Even the end of it was exciting, wasn't it, boy?"

"That wasn't the end," Shannon said. "This is." He hit Regan in the mouth. Regan fell against the desk, didn't go all the way down. He took out a handkerchief, dabbed at his cut lip. Then, very deliberately, he went around the desk and sat down in his chair. His agate-hard eyes drilled O'Meara. "You put him up to this?"

O'Meara said, "No." He didn't say anything else.

Mayor Arbogast's glasses glinted frostily. "You left out this part, Shannon."

"I thought he might be listening to you on the air. They have radios in airplanes too, these days. He might have decided to bail out."

Chief Regan pressed all the buttons on his desk at once. Outside, an alarm gong sounded. At least forty cops tried to get through the door in a bunch. Regan pointed a finger at Shannon. "Arrest that

"

ast said pettishly, "Go away."

O'Meara didn't say anything,

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ached across the desk and egan in the mouth again. No- thing about it for a minute. took off his glasses, he cops in the door.

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of you!" He didn't get out of his chair.

Mayor Arbogast looked at Shannon. "I'm still trusting you, but this is all over my head. Hadn't we better clear it up before the papers hear about it?"

Shannon's eyes glowed. "Regan shot my skipper. He shot a guy who had been his friend for twenty years. I'm reserving a front row seat to see him hanged for it."

"You'll never see it," Regan said. "Because I didn't do it. I was in Florida when it happened."

Shannon looked at him. "You never were in Florida. You left for Florida, but you never got there. The skipper gave you all the breaks a friend could, but you weren't satisfied. You wanted to hang onto your office and the side money. There was no way you could do this with the skipper alive, because he was honest. So you came back and killed him."

"You're a fool!"

"Sure. I've never claimed to be anything else. That's why it took me so long to get the picture." Shannon started unstrapping Regan's suitcase.

Regan took a gun out of a desk drawer. "Leave it alone, Shannon."

"I was waiting for that," Shannon said. He hurled himself straight at the gun. It went off. The slug went through the plaster cast, through the broken arm, only a little way into his chest. It didn't stop him.

Before Regan could squeeze the trigger a second time Shannon's fist closed on the gun, wrenched it free. He began beating Regan over the head with it, quite methodically. O'Meara and Arbogast finally pulled him off.

"Shannon, you're crazy!"

He looked down at the gun in his hand. "A little," he admitted. He smiled then, looking at Regan's head. "It's nice to be crazy once in a while. He bruises easily, doesn't he?"

The gun fell out of his hand and he sat down suddenly.

O'Meara got down on his knees beside Regan. Presently he rose, staring moodily at Shannon. "You didn't kill him."

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Shannon looked at Regan's ankles. On one of them, through the sheer silk, you could see black and blue marks, as though very strong fingers had gripped the ankle quite recently. "Yes, he bruises easily," Shannon said. "I put those marks on him this afternoon, in Captain Goudy's house. I think he finally located what he was looking for then. You might search his suitcase." He put his hand up under the sling. There was a little blood, no pain. He could almost feel the slug, it was so close to the skin. The impact had even shocked all the ache out of his broken arm. It was numb.

GUS VOGEL came in with Fran McGowan. She looked at Shannon's face, went to her knees beside him. "Oh, Shan, are you hurt?"

He nodded dully. "I've been hurt for a long time, kitten. Ever since they found my skipper dead in an alley. I guess maybe he'll feel better now. I don't know."

"Of course he will, Shan," she said, humoring him. "Of course he will." She looked sort of helplessly at Vogel.

Gus came over, put his derby on the desk, looked at a pudgy hand. He slapped Shannon with the hand. Hard. Then he said, "Excuse me, John J."

The dullness went out of Shannon's eyes. "Why, you—" Then he grinned, crookedly, but as if he was in his right mind again. "Remind me to kick you in the pants some time, will you, Gus?"

Vogel nodded happily. O'Meara went to the door, let in a couple dicks, jerked his head at the still unconscious Regan. "Take him away some place."

Arbogast was clucking his tongue over a small memo book, bound in limp morocco. There were some pass books, too. He tossed the memo book to O'Meara. "That ought to help you sort out the sheep from the goats. He had quite a tight little organization." His lips moved soundlessly, totalling some of the entries in the pass books. "Hmmm, fancy this!"

O'Meara looked at Shannon, "How did you know?"

"I didn't. I just knew my skipper, is all. I knew him inside and out. I finally got around to thinking about how far he would go for a friend, and Regan leaving town like he did, on the eve of election—well, it gave me an idea. Say it was Regan, not you, who was crooked. Say the skipper found it out. Maybe he even had those little books to prove it. But Regan was his friend, get it? He wouldn't let Regan go on, but he would give him a chance to get away.

"Regan pretended to go away. Then he came back. He wanted what the skipper had. While he was looking for it the skipper caught him and was killed. Regan couldn't find the stuff.

"Rattled, he went to his pal, Big Nick Lombardi. Lombardi already had Duquesne's check. I think that Regan at some time must have visited Duquesne and lifted the gun. Duquesne probably remembered this visit, suspected who had taken the gun. That's why he tried to get Regan tonight at the airport. Floyd was a funny guy. He never said much, but I guess he could hate like the rest of us.

"Anyway, Lombardi and Regan went back and jobbed the skipper and Duquesne both. Regan went into hiding until enough time had elapsed for him to get to Miami and back."

O'Meara shook his head. "Why didn't he go to Miami?"

"He hadn't found the stuff. Lombardi couldn't find it. Between them, th
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"What the hell?" O'Meara grinned. "They're all dead, aren't they?"

"Yeah, but I feel bad about Duquesne. He was a square guy according to his lights."

Arbogast closed his lips firmly. "He was a gambler. Good or bad, it's better that he's gone." He took off his glasses, pointed them at Shannon. "You still haven't shown proof that Regan wasn't in Miami."

"I can," Shannon assured him. "I've got airplane pilots, dispatchers, field crews and even a key-pounder who will plot out his course for him. Regan left here in a transcontinental plane. He got off at Las Vegas, flew back. This afternoon, after he finally located the stuff he wanted in the skipper's house, he again flew to Vegas. From there he wired that he was coming in. He caught the transcontinental back. With all that, and the stuff you're holding in your hands, if we can't convict him I'll finish beating him to death and enjoy it."

O'Meara coughed gently. "Why did you shoot Lombardi?"

"Because he would have shot me."

"You deliberately went there intending to shoot him."

Shannon shrugged.

"Well, you can't bust a town wide open without injuring a few of its leading citizens, can you?"

Arbogast peered intently at Shannon's face. "Was that the real reason you shot him, Lieutenant?"

"No," Shannon said honestly. "He made me mad." He grinned like a kid. "I oughta learn to control my temper. Some time . . ."

THE END

Looking Ahead!

FAST AND LOOSE

If you didn't meet Joel and Garda Sloane as they set the country on its ear by their first appearance, it's time you got acquainted. Joel is a dealer in rare books, with an uncontrollable addiction to criminology—and to Garda. In their latest adventure, they find themselves up to their necks in California millionaires, priceless Shakespeare manuscripts and a general fog of violence. But that's duck soup to them. Beginning a hilarious new novel by the author of the prize-winning book and film, "Fast Company,"

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NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—FEBRUARY 25

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

EVIDENTLY believing not only in striking while the iron is hot, but in lashing out before the iron gets a chance to kick him in the teeth, that eminent chronicler of California calamity, Carl Rathjen, writes in to say that the picture he has painted in "Two Steps from Hades" is true and he can prove it. Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, please note. (Parenthetically we're wondering if loyal sons of the Cinema and Grapefruit State aren't referring to the recent conflagration as "Unusual Warm Spell for This Time of Year.")

CARL RATHJEN

As with the flood story, "It Rained One Night," I've put nothing into this fire story that cannot be verified by an examination of the reports in the Los Angeles papers, even to so minor an incident as the city editor's comment about his photographer's pictures.

Of course Stoneman's emotional experiences are fictional, and, keeping the unity of the story in mind, I have tried to keep all incidents in their proper locale and chronological order. But all Stoneman's physical activities are based on fact, actual experiences of fire-fighters who took part in the Santa Monica fire, and strangely, or not so strangely, some of those happenings seemed too unbelievable to put in a fiction story, even though the story is based on fact.

Here's one I toned down a bit and changed around slightly for the story: Two deputies and a fire warden struggled a half-hour to overpower three women and force them to leave their fire-threatened home. And then there were the men who were trapped and lay encircled closely by flames for *three* hours and came out of it alive!

As with the flood story, I am ready to send detailed proof of everything I've written.
San Gabriel, California.

ALSO from California comes this letter penned by the newest member of the Hornblower-for-President Association.

E. S. WALTER

I have just finished the story "Flying Colours" and I think that it is as good as "The Ship of Ishtar" any day in the week. I hope that Mr. Forester will give us some more Hornblower stories. I don't see why the motion pictures don't grab the stories of Captain Hornblower, and make series pictures out of them.

Generally I do not like to write, but I feel I must write to thank you and compliment you on your good stories. I do not need to hope; for I know you will keep up the good work. Enough has been said so I wish ARGOSY a happy and prosperous new year.
Hollywood, Calif.

THE cover this week is the work of a new-to-Argosy artist, Marshall Frantz, and we're mighty pleased to have him with us. Mr. Frantz has done covers, color illustrations and black-and-whites for nearly all the smooth-paper magazines, including the Satevepost, Cosmopolitan, the American Magazine, Collier's, etc.

He lays claim to forty-eight years of age. Nobody seeing him believes this for a minute. He got started as an artist, he says, by having a scholarship for Philadelphia's School of Industrial Art tossed into his lap. Not because he deser
he shyly insists, but "because n
wanted it."

After two years of stu
Frantz considered himself
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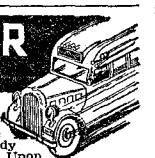

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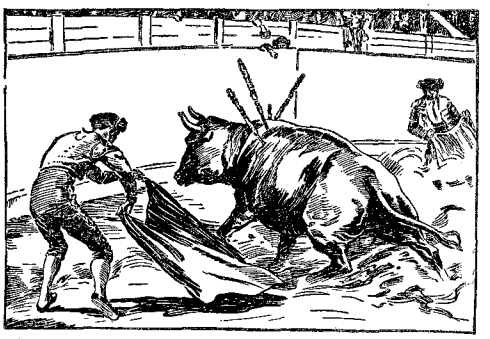

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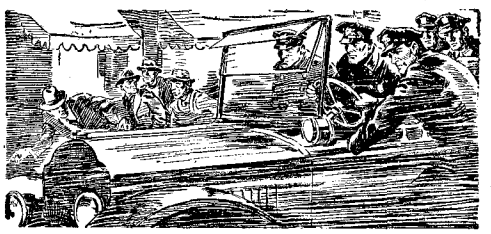

Action

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